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1210.







Christmas In the Olden Time

OR

THE WASSAIL BOWL.

BY

JOHN MILLS,

AUTHOR OF "THE OLD ENGLISH GENTLEMAN,"
"THE STAGE COACH, OR THE ROAD OF LIFE," "THE
ENGLISH FIRESIDE," "THE SPORTSMAN'S LIBRARY,"
"THE OLD HALL, OR OUR HEARTH AND
HOMESTEAD," &c. &c.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY DUNCAN,
ENGRAVED BY LINTON.

H. HURST, KING WILLIAM ST., STRAND.



1845

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"Some say, that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
This bird of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad ;
The nights are wholesome : then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time."

PREFACE.

IN submitting a Christmas Story, and blending with it the sports and pastimes of the olden time at this festival period of the year, the writer has endeavoured to "point a moral to adorn his tale;" and should some links in the chain of events require a reference to the fertile imaginations of his readers, let them remember that it is one of fancy and not of fact. Assured, however, that if he has failed to please to the full bent of his earnest desires, at least he cannot have given offence to the most fastidious of tastes; and therefore, with both hope and confidence, he trusts for that encouraging and lenient consideration on the part of his critics and patrons, with which his humble efforts hitherto have been received.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OLDEN TIME.

CHAPTER I.

"'Tis winter cold and rude!
Heap, heap the warming wood;
The wild wind hums his sullen song to-night:
Haste, boy! this gloomy hour
Demands relief; the cheerful tapers light."

'Tis Christmas! the season of hope, of joy, and revelry! see where he comes, hoary-locked and bleached with age, crowned with wreaths of winter evergreens! Ivy, holly, and rosemary are twined and blended in his crown. In his hand he bears the wassail bowl; deep and full. From his lips quaint ballads, carols, and ditties are crooned, and good old customs rummaged from the stores of his memory. 'Tis Christmas, right merry Christmas! Light, glad hearts beat the lighter to his approach, and those sinking

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with lank necessities and sorrow may, haply, cease to throb with anguish. The young, the loving and beloved, and those whose lives are waning with the year, solitary and lonely, alike hail his coming. For the one the future has no fear; the past no sigh. For the other, should the recollection of days gone by be mingled with sorrow and regret, still they will think of careless childhood, when the dear old home was the first and priceless thought, and its fireside the sanctuary of all most earthly dear. Yes, it was here the prayer was taught in early infancy. It was here that the fond mother blessed her child, and, with bended knee, joined in his lisping petition. It was here the joyous winter games were played, the marvellous tales and stories told, songs sung, pranks played, and the jest and joke went round. Musing thoughts produce the scenes as fresh as those of yesterday; but the actors in them have passed, and passed away for ever. The old man is friendless and alone.

The yule log and a pile of faggots blazed upon the hearth, casting a glowing but fitful

gleam to the farthest corner of the room, and against the great beams and rafters stretching across the roof. The polished panels of the walls flashed in the cheerful light, and the huge miseltoe, severed from the limb of a stalwart oak—suspended in the centre of the ceiling—looked as green as spring grass just sprinkled by a shower.

And there they were, the youthful and the old, assembled beneath the time-worn roof of the Baronial Hall, keeping their Christmas holiday. Now, indeed, it was little more than a wide and rambling place in which flitches of bacon, hams, tongues, and bags of herbs were hung, mingled with the meshes of the weaving spider; but in times long passed, and almost forgotten, the very nails and hooks crumbling in the beams held bucklers, shields, and bows, and many a lance shivered in tilt and tournament. A few even of the present will tell ye that their fathers recounted many a strange custom witnessed in this self-same old hall. That as the Squire's grandsire sat in his stiff-backed walnut chair, surrounded by his

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vassals, tenantry, and serfs, the soused boar's head, garnished with sprigs of rosemary and bay-leaves, was carried with all the state of "minstrelsy" before his worship. Years have sped, and with the years so have customs changed.

A right merry time is Christmas. Ha, ha ! It makes one's heart leap to think that Christmas is a-coming.

" There are bright eyes that sparkle so,
When whisper'd 'neath the miseltoe,
' A kiss we'll seal.' "

God bless her. And be she maid, wife, or widow, may there always be a heart to say " God bless her ! "

Unheeded, and dwindled almost into forgetfulness, as the observances of Christmas in the olden time were, still fresh ones had taken their place ; and so far from the festivities and hospitality being neglected in the old hall, never did its beams echo with more joyous mirth than on the present occasion. The Squire—a fine old English gentleman, with powdered cue, doublet, and trunk-hose

—as was his wont at each succeeding Christmas, and which had been that of his ancestors for generations, had assembled his tenants, neighbours, and dependents together, and they were now in the very zenith of their revel.

The village fiddler—he is to be found at every wedding and merry-making—began to flag from his unintermitting labour. Up and down in the country dance had the couples glided to his ‘Sir Roger de Coverley’ until the very bow squeaked from want of rosin. Reels had been whirled, toasts pledged, and games played of every sort and kind. Blind-man’s-buff, post-and-pair, hunt the slipper, succeeded each other in rapid succession. Oh what rollicking mirth there was! And now the Squire commenced preparing the wassail bowl with his own hands. Rich wine, highly spiced with nutmeg, ginger, and sweet-scented cloves, sugar, toast, and hissing and roasted crabs, were mingled together, and then the brimming cup was ready.

Standing in the centre of the hall, with

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the company forming a wide circle round him, the Squire lifted the fragrant mixture with both hands above his head, and said, "Was-haile, I pledge each and all," and bringing the bowl to his lips, he took a fair deep draught.

From one to the other the bowl was passed, and each repeated, "Was-haile," ere he drank of the contents. Twice was it emptied, and twice replenished, before all had partaken of the generous liquor; for it was the prescribed rule, to which there were no voluntary exceptions, to drink deeply of the wassail bowl. Among those who did ample justice to it was the before-mentioned village fiddler, who, after quaffing until spent for breath, continued his vocation with such enlivened power, that sparks of fire, as well as notes of inspiration, seemed to fly from the strings, and the quaintly carved chairs and settles to join in the jig. On went the dance, and round passed the glass, and the laugh and shout rung among the dusty cobwebbed rafters until they shook and jarred with the mirth.

“ That ’s well, my lads and lasses ! ” cried the Squire, a delighted spectator of the scene ; and, perceiving that the general hilarity increased with the cheer, he breathed a fervent hope that every one present might be there, and as happy, when Christmas came again.

“ A song ! a song ! ” was now the cry ; and quiet being obtained, and all seated about the wood fire, the Squire proceeded to exercise his right of selecting from the company one to comply with the general request. The choice fell to the lot of a ruddy-faced, good-looking yeoman, sitting close by the side of a young and pretty girl. Without making objection or excuse, he commenced in a fine manly voice the following old song :—

“ Maidens, don your kirtles sheen,
The hall is dress’d with holly green :
To the fields and woods let ’s go,
Gathering in the miseltoe.
Then maidens don your kirtles sheen,
For happy all shall be, I ween.

“ The heir, with roses in his shoes,
To-night shall village partner choose.

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The fire 's with dried yule-logs supplied,
Now roaring up the chimney wide.
Then maidens don your kirtles sheen,
For happy all shall be, I ween.

“ The wassail, in a deep brown bowl,
From hand to hand shall blithely trowl;
In hearty notes, both loud and strong,
We'll sing our merry Christmas song.
Then maidens don your kirtles sheen,
For happy all shall be, I ween.

“ 'Tis Christmas taps the best of ale,
'Tis Christmas tells the merry tale,
'Tis Christmas gambols oft will cheer
The poor man's heart for half the year.
Then maidens don your kirtles sheen,
For happy all shall be, I ween.”

Loud and long were the plaudits bestowed upon the yeoman's song ; and, whether from exhaustion, or a temporary flagging of the late and long-continued boisterous glee, some minutes elapsed, and yet there appeared no disposition to quit the seats already occupied. The fiddler scraped the most enlivening tunes, from his well-frayed catgut ; but in vain. No one rose to again trip it on the light fantastic foot ; and, save for the hum of busy voices, the Christmas revel might have seemed like an expiring ember on the hearth, waning to a close.

The cock crowed once, but not from the approach of day. His doze in the partlet was broken by the unusual nocturnal tumult, and, vexed at the disturbance, he threw his bold challenge on the breeze, and felt ready to spur his own shadow, reflected on the wall in the moonlight. Drowsy bats, skulking in nook and cranny, stared with sleepy wonderment, and clung more closely to their retreats. Even the screech-owl ceased her startling-scream, to listen; and many a mouse, scared to its securest hole, pricked his ears with throbbing fear.

“Since ye seem to be wearied,” observed the Squire, glancing around him, “what say ye to a story?”

“Ay, ay; a story, a story!” was now the echo.

“Well, well!” rejoined the Squire, good-humouredly, “a story it shall be. Who ’ll tell it?”

To be sure. There was the rub. Who would tell it? Countless feet shuffled on the floor, and each one present appeared to become immediately engrossed with some

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important subject with his neighbour. No voice was raised above a whisper, and all appeared a little nervous and uneasy.

“ I say,” repeated the Squire, raising his voice, “ who will tell it ? ”

But there was no offer, and, after an effective pause, which seemed to keep alive the awakened fears, he added—“ Since we cannot have a freely-given tale, I must exercise my right of call. Tom Bright, the tale shall be told by you.”

This was spoken to an old and hardy son of the soil, sitting on a settle under the wide and yawning chimney. His hair was white, and thinly scattered over his brow ; but scarcely a wrinkle furrowed or lined his cheek. In his clear blue eyes good-will and kindliness of disposition were blended ; and although his back was bent by time, his frame still looked strong and sturdy, and capable of bearing a long day’s honest labour.

By his side sat, decked in holiday gear, Tom Bright’s better half. Bleached as a snow-drift was the close cap, fringed with lace of her own handicraft ; and the once

nut-brown and luxuriant locks, now frosted and whitening with age, were parted in two smooth and equal divisions. In her face the glád expression of a sunny heart shone; and as she sat with her mittened hands crossed upon her lap, in all the grandeur of farthingale, high-heeled shoes, and buckles, few happier mortals have been met with on a Christmas night than Mistress Bright.

“ Well, sir,” exclaimed Tom Bright, “ I’m but an indifferent hand at the telling of a story; but if ye’ll put up with what I know, I’ll do my best to please ! ”

“ Very good,” rejoined the Squire. “ Nothing more is wanted here, than each to do his best to please and be pleased.”

Tom Bright drew a finger across his forehead, looked at the ceiling just above his head, and dropping his eyes gradually, until they fell upon the features of his wife, he brought the palms of his hands together with a slight crack, expressive of a resolved idea. After clearing his voice with sundry hems and hums, he settled himself in his seat, and then began.

CHAPTER II.

“ Had I power, I should
Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,
Uproar the universal peace, confound
All unity on earth.”

“ It must be a few years more than two score,” said Tom, appealing to his wife, “ since we first became acquainted ? ”

“ Adzooks, Tom ! ” returned Mistress Bright, bridling with wounded vanity, “ ye make one appear old before the time, I ’m thinking.” And then the good dame looked around, as if she had said a very good thing, and laughed immeasurably.

“ Ay,” continued Tom, making a knowing gesture with his head—“ we don’t add to our youth by concealing our age. Ye may don your ruffles, lace, and farthingale, and bind your hair deftly ’neath your coif,

but ye can't, Mary, hide the stooping gait, keep the locks from frosting, or smooth the creases in your cheek. Sure and stealthy is the tread of age."

"And what, forsooth," rejoined Mistress Bright, now a little piqued and out of humour with the personal allusions of her husband, "has the tally of my years to do with your story?"

"Much, Mary," quietly added Tom. "For I must date it from the time when you were called—and with right good reason, too—the Village Pride. It seems but yesterday," continued he, "that we joined hands, with an hundred more, round the Maypole on the green. It seems but yesterday that we went Maying together, and roved through the fields and woods in the autumn-time, gathering woodnuts and mushrooms. It seems but yesterday, Mary, that you stood by the old well—that loitering-place for lad and lassie—when I asked you to become my wife. All this seems but yesterday; and yet we were young then, and now we are old."

There was something in Tom Bright's

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delivery that riveted the attention of his hearers. Not a word was spoken, even by Mistress Bright; and she felt, perhaps for the first time in her life, far more disposed to listen to her husband than exercise her own voluble powers.

A few present may remember, but a very few, that at the time I am alluding to, a stranger came amongst us. Whether he had any particular calling or object in being in these parts, I forget, and for aught can tell, was never told. For many weeks he remained at the Chequers, talking and spending freely; and by his off-hand way of offering a cup to any one who would drink, recounting tales and jests, singing roundelays, and making himself the very life of the hostelrie, soon became in high favour with all its frequenters. With a great many others of the same age and station as myself, I used often to pass my evening, and always on a Saturday, when work was done, in the kitchen of the inn. It was here we made our wrestling matches,

games at quoits, pitch-the-bar, and other of our rural sports. Little else, indeed, was spoken of than diversions of this kind; and although many a stoup of old October ale was tapped and quaffed, seldom did one leave with a reproach for ribaldry or deep-drinking.

I can scarcely account how the first step to the change took place; but soon after the Stranger's arrival, a very great alteration was made in the subjects of discussion and interest. Instead of the usual topics of discourse, he led us to speak of religion; and upon hearing the opinions taught us to express and believe, turned them into ridicule, and laughed them to scorn. Possessed of ready wit, and a tongue lighter than a sheep's bell, he silenced all our rude speech with the ease that a gust of wind puts out a feeble rushlight. We sat, and stared, and listened,—and yet the more we listened, the more we wished to hear.

I should tell ye that the Stranger's appearance was remarkable, and one which I had never seen before, and never have seen since. He was lean and lank, high-shoul-

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dered, and crooked of limb. His head, devoid of brow, and bristling with short, crisp, coal-black hair, seemed placed upon his trunk without a neck; and his two small, black, snake-like eyes twinkled and turned so restlessly in their sockets, that they were always glancing at every face in the room, as if to read it. Strange as it may appear, too, whenever thoughts arose amongst us, questioning who he was, his ends or purposes, and notwithstanding that they were unexpressed, he seemed to be as well aware of them as if dropped in plain and measured words. I recollect that this wonder-exciting faculty was particularly remarkable on an eventful Christmas Eve, on which my story turns.

We formed a wide ring about the hearth of the Chequers on the night before Christmas-day—and just one month before that named for my marriage—with the Stranger sitting in the centre of the circle. Between his lips was a long black and polished tube, and at the end a white earthen bowl in the form of a human scull, from which he drew

volumes of thick, dense, smoke, and threw them forth from his lips in clouds above his head. Lolling backwards in his chair, and with upturned chin, he appeared to be carelessly watching their progress, curling slowly from him, and as they neared the chimney, streaming upwards in the draught.

Forgetful, at the moment, of the present, I began thinking of what the future might be, and to weigh the probable events to come. "On this day month," thought I, "I shall be a husband."

"No you won't," said the Stranger, and, as if communing with himself, continued, "Human foresight is very short—remarkably so."

I cannot but say that this first remark occasioned some surprise, and I looked at him, startled, and saw his lips pursed with inward laughter, and his eyes shining like two glow-worms in the dark.

"You surely can't read a man's thoughts?" mentally observed I.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared he, making the

house echo from vault to roof, with as loud, empty, and hollow a laugh as mortal ears were ever greeted with. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Not myself only, but every one present, felt a cold shiver through their veins at this hoarse laugh; and some began, in silence, to lift their hats from the ground, preparing to depart.

"Pshaw!" ejaculated the stranger, "It wants two full hours to midnight yet; not one shall leave. Landlord," continued he, in a loud authoritative voice, "bring your best, your fiery and strongest liquor. Stint no measure; but fill the deepest to the lip. Remember, 'tis Christmas-eve. We'll drink, lads—drink, till cock-crow."

Although ill at ease, each sat still, watching the wildness of look, gesture, and manner of the Stranger. He gurgled bottle after bottle of potent drinks into a huge bowl, and knocking the ashes from his pipe, stirred them up with it, and set them in a blaze with a lighted ember.

"Ha, ha!" laughed he, dancing round and about the hissing flames licking upwards in

serpent folds, " 'Tis Christmas-eve ! We 'll drink, lads—drink, till cock-crow."

" I 'll not taste a drop," said I to myself.

" Oh yes, you will," replied the Stranger, mingling the flaming contents together, and peering at me from the corners of his eyes. " Oh yes, you will," repeated he. " We shall all drink."

" A murrain on ye !" I muttered inaudibly on my lips, between wonder and dread at his being thus able to respond to my inward thoughts.

" Tut, tut !" ejaculated the Stranger. " Never curse. A mortal has no more power to bring down evils from his maledictions than to produce hailstones or flakes of snow. Drink," continued he, offering me a horn filled with the potent mixture.

I felt to have no will of resistance, although my wishes were to refuse ; and, forced to obey that which seemed a mere voluntary act, I drained the horn to the last drop.

" Ha, ha, ha !" laughed he again. " I told ye so. I knew you'd drink. Ha, ha, ha !"

Scarcely had I swallowed the stifling draught, when my brain reeled, and through each vein and conduit fierce heat shot, and seemed to run and mingle with my blood. Leaping from my seat, I hallooed, whooped, shrieked, danced, and laughed like one possessed, and had no control over thought, word, or action. It was the same with the rest; for as each quaffed from the horn offered by the Stranger in rotation, he sprang upon his feet and joined in the yells and din, until all were mad,—stark, staring, mad.

“Pile the fire,” said the Stranger, throwing faggot after faggot, and log after log upon the hearth. “Higher and higher yet,” continued he, heaping on the wood until the scorching flames licked half way up the yawning chimney, and threw such a heat into the room, that it soon became like a suffocating oven.

Fast and furious the devilish scene progressed. The Stranger placed a high chair upon the board, and there sat, above the crowd, cheering their reckless mirth, and



reeling from side to side in ecstasies of delight.

“’Tis well, my merry men!” cried he. “Shout and dance; ’tis Christmas-eve! Ha, ha, ha! We’ll drink till cock-crow.”

Under his directions and guidance we now commenced a series of ribald mummeries, the details of which I shall not offend ye by entering into. Sufficient for my purpose to state, that to give the particulars of any one of the obscene and blasphemous mockeries, would curdle your blood with horror.

“Look ye,” called the Stranger, rolling his head, which glowed and steamed like a furnace. “You all have heard of relics of the good old saints and others, and how they used to be valued and worshipped not long ago. This was one,” continued he, holding up the tube of his pipe, “and I took it with my own hands from a religious house, now razed to the ground. A sleek, oily Abbot—and one who set but little store by the strict regulations of his vows—ruled the order. His hood was fastened with a chased gold clasp, wrought in a true-lovers’ knot, and—

save at matins, mass, and vespers, when he looked holy as the holiest—his air and bearing was anything but of the priestly kind. With his falsities and flattery, he made tools of both priesthood and people, and turned each and all to his own self-gratification. Among the riches of the house,” continued the Stranger, almost convulsed with laughter—“and which were far more valuable than gold-crooked crosier, jewelled crucifix, and studded mitre—were a few pigbones in a glass—a seal, said to have been Saint Peter’s when he walked upon the sea—and a pillow-covering pronounced to be the Virgin Mary’s veil. But not content with the money and offerings which the poor and needy made upon the exhibition of these relics, the princely and worldly-minded abbot resolved upon a new device and attraction, in aid of the filling of his coffers. From an old and sound block of wood he hewed this,” said he, whirling and flourishing the tube of his pipe above his head, “declaring it to be a piece of the cross on which the Saviour of mankind was crucified. The impious falsehood

brought thousands of adoring pilgrims to the shrine, and among them was myself. Yes, *I* was there. They couldn't shut me out. Burnt incense curled in fragrant clouds before the altar; but they couldn't shut me out. Countless voices rose and swelled in chaunts of praise; but they couldn't shut me out. Candles were lighted, rosaries counted, holy waters sprinkled; but they couldn't shut me out. No," he continued, exultingly, "of God they had lied before God and man, and they couldn't shut *me* out! In spite of all, I seized the relic. Yes, *I* snatched it from the shrine. Ha, ha, ha! My fingers clutched it from the shaven monks. Ha, ha, ha! 'Tis Christmas-eve. We'll drink lads, drink till cock-crow."

Wild and wilder yet the orgies grew. The bowl was filled, and no sooner filled than drained. Shrieks of laughter made the welkin ring; and the voice of the Stranger, now grown hoarse from shouting, pealed above the rest. Tearing the miseltoe from the beam in the ceiling, and binding with it holly and ivy, he dipped them in the liquor,

and firing it, held the flaming bunch above his head.

“One more,” cried he, “and only one. Drink—Hark!”

The church clock struck.

“Quick, quick!” he hallooed. “Another pledge, and then ——”

I heard no more. The dazzling light faded, and the uproar gradually died away, sinking in the distance like expiring echoes. When my senses were recovered, I found myself lying close to a haystack, with my limbs stiffened with the hoar frost, now glistening on the greensward in the early rays of a cold and cheerful Christmas morning. My temples throbbed, and my heart fluttered like a leaf. Was it all a dream? Not quite.

CHAPTER III.

“By the roses of the spring,
By maidhood, honour, truth, and everything,
I love thee.”

FEVERISH and depressed, and incapable of separating the events which really happened on the night preceding, and those that existed merely in my brain heated by drink and riot, I rose from the cold ground with a shiver not unlike an ague fit. On my way homewards, I saw Mary hastening across a mead, and, in shame of the wretched looks and feelings that I had, endeavoured to avoid her. She, however, espied me, and, aware of the proceedings of the night,—as, indeed, the whole village were—began at once to reproach me with them.

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“ Oh, Tom ! ” said she, shaking her finger admonishingly, “ And is it this I ’m to expect when wedded to ye ? The alehouse, Tom, night after night, and bad company ? ”

“ Nay, nay,” I replied, “ it shall not happen again.”

“ So you ’ve said, Tom,” she rejoined, “ often of late—very often—or ye shouldn’t find my voice raised to upbraid ye.”

“ Pardon me this once,” returned I, “ and you shall not have cause to censure me again.”

“ May God forgive ye, Tom, as I do,” she added. “ But in breaking your promise, and never abiding by it, what is it but a falsehood, repeated o’er and o’er again ? ”

“ Do not speak thus unkindly to me,” said I. “ I know that I ’m greatly in the wrong.”

“ To acknowledge our faults is the first step to their reparation,” returned Mary. “ Let us think, then, that yours has been taken. But mind, Tom,” continued she, in a tone and manner that I have not forgotten, “ that unless ye keep true and faith-

fully *this* assurance given, I will never become your wife."

"Then you cannot love me as you 've said," remarked I, piqued at the threat.

"Yes, Tom, I do," she replied, sorrowfully; "as well and sincerely as ever woman loved a man. But what happiness can there be for either, if the course of life you now pursue be continued? It used not to be so. There was a time when your good name was untarnished as a sot, and your tongue never uttered one profane word. At church you were always seen among the most attentive and best conducted. It was there that I first acknowledged to myself my maiden love for ye, and prayed to God that you might love me, Tom, too. To see your honest face full of truth and gladness, made my heart feel warm and beat much quicker than its wont, Tom; and now to see it pale and haggard, makes it sorrowful and sad. Look back but for a little while, Tom, and you 'll find a change, a great change. Now you pass long nights in riotous excess and drinking. The coarse

oath drops familiarly from your lips, and seldom indeed does your shadow darken the threshold of the church-door."

"No," rejoined I, "because, whenever I go, I am pointed at in the minister's remarks."

"'Tis your conscience points, Tom, and not the minister's remarks," returned Mary. "Let it direct you rightly," continued she. "Repent of your evil sayings and doings whilst there 's time, and be again the good, dear Tom you were."

"I will," cried I, throwing myself into her arms. "I will; so help me Heaven!"

"Amen, Tom, with all my heart," responded Mary.

It might have been the wind, or a sound existing only in my heated fancy; but, as plainly as I now hear myself speak, the same mocking words, with a loud laugh, distinct and clear, were repeated: "No, you won't. HUMAN FORESIGHT IS VERY SHORT—REMARKABLY SO."

"Hark!" exclaimed I, almost frozen with horror.

“What!” said Mary, seizing my palsied hand, bewildered at the sudden expression of my terror. “What, Tom? Speak!”

“Did you hear nothing?” muttered I, in a thick, choking voice. “Did nobody speak?”

“No one but ourselves,” responded Mary, soothingly.

“Art sure?” returned I, as cold drops oozed upon my brow and trickled down my cheeks.

“Quite,” added she.

“I thought,” said I, trembling like a frightened child, “that some one spoke quite close to us.”

“And what if it had been so?” replied Mary. “We have no cause to be ashamed of what we either say or do.”

“True,” I rejoined. “And yet,” continued I, glancing in dread around me, “I’ll be sworn that I heard——”

“Hush, Tom, hush!” said Mary, endeavouring to calm my agitation. “Your brain is disarranged and fevered, and conjures up strange sounds, perhaps; but, be-

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lieve me, there is nothing. I have heard," she continued, "of people, ere now, whose eyes have deceived them with forms and sights as palpable as if they had really been, instead of being the mere effects, and airy nothings, of a disordered frame."

"It cannot be deception," retorted I in my bewilderment. "The words were——"

"What?" said Mary, as I hesitated to repeat them.

"I scarcely know," rejoined I, "and yet they sounded familiar to me."

"A truce with this!" returned she, struggling to regain her wonted liveliness. "I will not scold you more, Tom, neither shall you remain longer a victim to phantoms and nervous fears. Go home, and to rest," she continued, "and, after a few hours' quietude and sleep, you 'll feel refreshed and composed."

"I will," rejoined I; and, encouraged and full of hope from her cheerful kindness, added, "Since you 've forgiven me, I reckon little of what I suffer, although each nerve be goaded to the quick."

“And yet remember, Tom,” said Mary, like the Spirit of Good warning me from evil, “unless we profit by our sufferings, unless the pains and penalties with which the past be chequered teach us to avoid that rock-ribbed shore, where so many human hopes and joys are wrecked and shattered, of what avail are they? Trials and heart-aches are not ordained for the mere purposes of temporary anguish; but as impressions from the hand of stern experience, intended to warn the wayfarer from the hidden shoal and quicksand. He who heeds them not must perish.”

“Ha! ha! ha! Ha! ha! ha!”

“There,” hallooed I, in agony at the well-known laugh, and yet as unlike a laugh as a death-shriek. “Did you not hear that?”

“I heard nothing unusual,” replied Mary.

“I am not mad,” rejoined I; “I know you, myself, and all I see. Why doubt mine ears?”

“Your words and looks are so strange

and wild," returned she, alarmed, "that I can scarcely guess your meaning. But if a scared twig had only fallen from a tree, or a pebble in the brook, I must have heard it as well as you."

"And—and," gasped I, "art certain no one mocked your words?"

"Indeed, Tom, I am," said Mary, twining her arm around me, and pressing me to her bosom, as if I was a child afeard. "Not a sound," she continued, "but the cawing rook, and robin's whistle, break upon the ear thus early."

"And yet, audible as your words now spoken," returned I, "fiend-like mirth, as if in triumph, echoed far and wide."

"Think of it only as it is," she rejoined. "Your distempered mind is fraught with shadows of unreal evils; and when restored to a healthy tone—as by repose it will be—you, yourself, will ridicule the very causes of uneasiness. Go home, Tom," she continued, "and ere you close your eyes in slumber, pray that your resolutions may be strengthened, and that you may never again

wander from the path of a good and sober life."

"I will, I will," said I.

"Now, then, farewell," returned Mary. "Let us meet to-night under the old yew-tree, in the churchyard, just at moonrise."

A cold icy shudder thrilled through me at these words ; but why I knew not.

"In the churchyard at moonrise !" I repeated.

"And why not there ?" said Mary. "We have sat many a long hour under its dark waving shade, and talked of days to come, and of those long since past. Not far from its spreading branches, Tom, my good old mother sleeps the long, long sleep of death ; and the greensward, covering her narrow grave, always, to me, looks more speckled than the rest with daisies, violets, and prim-roses. 'Tis a spot on which a blessing seems to have fallen, Tom, and there I would have you meet me, to kneel together in the soft and stilly hour, and place wherein the most debased and hardened feel the influence of mis-spent lives, to ask forgiveness from

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Him who never turns an unwilling ear from the penitent's petition."

"There, then, I will meet you," replied I, somewhat consoled by Mary's kind and encouraging words; and yet, as we parted, a heavy load still weighed upon my heart.

CHAPTER IV.

“ In full-orbed glory the majestic moon
Rolls through the dark blue depths.
Around her steady ray
The desert circle spreads,
Like the round ocean, girded by the sea.
How beautiful is night!”

LONG had I slept. The moon's pale light was just tipping the tree-top as it bent in graceful measures to the wind, humming and whistling his winter tune through the stripped and leafless branches. In the chimney his hoarse breath roared, and creaked, and jarred against rickety casements, making old hinges squeak and doors to rattle with discordant noises.

Upon throwing open the window of my cottage, the nipping cold fanned my hot brow with grateful freshness, and with

folded arms upon the sill, I remained watching the thin and fleecy clouds skimming before the gale, and listening to the faint sounds of mirth which occasionally broke from this very hall. For, I should tell ye, that although no order was given to absent myself from the Christmas revel, then in the height of its fun and glee, yet knowing full well that I should be an unwelcome guest, from my late transgressions, I resolved to keep aloof. There was also a sullen and dogged satisfaction in the feeling that I was showing an independence of spirit ; and as the peals of laughter swelled and died upon the breeze, I became vexed and angry, and full of resentment. The knowledge, too, that Mary was there, surrounded by my rivals, inflamed me with jealousy, and the bitterness of my heart momentarily increased.

“ Ay,” thought I, snapping my fingers in derision, “ ye may laugh, dance, and sing, but I’ll be mirthful, too.”

“ That ’s well ! ” exclaimed a voice—and there stood the Stranger close before me,

with his eyes sparkling like the hoar frost in the moonlight, and showing his double row of white teeth from ear to ear. "That's well, Tom Bright," repeated he. And so you'll be mirthful, too?

I gave no answer; but a tremour seized me, and I felt rooted to the ground, as he echoed my own words.

"And why not?" he continued. "They're merry enough down there, I wot, and don't seem to miss your presence much. I just peeped in, and saw one who might have done so, had not another filled your place so well."

A curse would have burst from my tongue, but that it cleaved to the roof of my mouth.

"I told ye before," said he, "that cursing is of no avail. You might as well, and, for aught I know, a great deal better, bless your enemy, as to waste your breath in maledictions upon him."

There was a silence for a few seconds, and he appeared to be waiting for me to make some remark. I did not, however, do

so, and with an impatient gesture, he ejaculated—

“ Art stricken dumb, Tom Bright ? ”

“ No,” replied I, recovering myself.

“ Then why not speak to a friend ? ” rejoined he.

“ Because I ’m in no humour to hold converse with ye,” I returned, surlily.

“ Oh yes, you are ! ” added he, with a laugh, “ in the very best of humours, Tom Bright. I love to meet a man in such a rich, rollicking, humorous vein. He ’s ripe for anything.”

“ Good night,” said I, about closing the window.

“ Stay,” replied he, “ we mustn’t part thus. You are alone, Tom, and so am I. To-night, friends and kindred hearts draw more closely those bonds together, which the pleasures, the sorrows, and the cares of life are continually casting loose, and bind them with the genial warmth of common sympathy. To-night old feuds, and latent causes for envy, hatred, and malice, are forgotten, and gentle kindness cements the shivered

fragments of affection. To-night in the calendar of many a heart shall be recorded scenes fraught with hopes and happiness, lasting in memory imperishable. Surely, Tom Bright," continued he, in a soft and winning voice, "you 'll not shut yourself up with your own moody selfishness, and reject a friendly offer to pass a social hour or two?"

"I can't," rejoined I; and yet as I spoke I felt my determination wavering.

"Can't!" repeated he. "Pshaw! Man can do more than he ever has done, and will, when he *thinks* he can."

"I have an appointment to keep," I returned.

"I know it," added he briefly.

"How?" said I, with mingled fear and anger.

"There's nothing more easily to be accounted for," responded the Stranger, in a quiet and collected manner. "Men's tongues oftener conceal their thoughts than give expression to them. But from the inward and subtle working of the brain there are reflections to be seen in its prism, as

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definitive as if thrown on the surface of a mirror. To one skilled, as I am, in reading the human face, few thoughts are hidden, resolutions formed, passions fostered, or ends to be attained, without my being able to trace them, even in the most cunning and capable of maintaining their close secrecy. It can be no marvel, then, that I should be acquainted with yours."

I scarcely understood this reasoning; but it produced the effect of my losing much of the superstitious fear that I had had towards him.

"I 'll be with you by-an'-by," I rejoined.

"That 's bravely said," returned the Stranger. "Yes, yes; we 'll be mirthful, too," continued he, again harping upon my words.

"Listen!" observed I, as a loud shout was now borne towards us on the wind.

"There 's no occasion to be very attentive to those sounds," replied he, "unless, indeed, you may discover *one* voice above the rest more than usually happy."

This, spoken in a jeering tone, stung me deeply.

“ Did you see her?—I mean—”

“ I know perfectly whom you mean, interrupted he. “ Oh yes!” he continued, giving two or three long strides, and turning shortly upon his heel, “ I saw her.”

“ And—”

“ You ’d ask, what doing?” said he, without waiting for the further completion of the sentence. “ I ’ll tell ye. Woman-like, taking advantage of the absence of her lover.”

“ How?” exclaimed I.

“ Ha, ha, ha !” laughed the Stranger. “ Would you have me enter into particulars? Speaking with her eyes, pressing foot on foot, squeezing hand in hand, offering lip to lip—ha, ha ha !”

My brain became dizzy with the words, and yelling with passion and jealousy, I swore that I would destroy her.

“ But not to-night,” said he, stooping forwards and dropping his voice to a low whisper. “ Not in the lone churchyard, where no eye can be witness against ye—where there

is nothing but the dead, who tell no tales of the living."

"Yes," replied I, furiously; "to-night, and now."

"Stay, stay," he rejoined, catching me by the arm as I rushed frantically from the cottage door. "The night waxes colder. Come, and take a cup before you go."

"Not a drop," I returned, trying to break from his hold. "My blood 's on fire with your words!"

"You 'll not drink?" added he, interrogatively.

"No," said I, firmly.

"Then listen," continued the Stranger. "I told ye but half what I saw and heard."

"Go on, in the name of ——"

"Hush!" interrupted he, "I 'll speak in my own name."

"Do then, quickly," rejoined I, goaded to madness.

"I find you impatient, Tom Bright," returned he. "Most men are so, to learn their own miseries."

"'Tis best to know them than to be kept in doubt," observed I.

"Perhaps so," added he; "but that's a matter of opinion. However, to fulfil your request. Upon peeping into the hall, I saw *your* Mary sitting in a corner, apart from the company, with an arm clasped round her waist. A cheek, too, rested against hers; and if one might judge, from the flush and dimpled smiles playing on her lips, the whispered words, breathed soft and low, were far from being disagreeable. After some more dalliance which lovers only take interest in, she rose with her companion, and both quitting the hall, came close to the spot where I stood concealed from observation."

"'He never loved you as I do, and ever have done,' observed he.

"'Perhaps not,' she replied, 'for love, in every old tale and story, is said to be unrequited.'

"'But why should it?' rejoined he, earnestly. 'I have known you as long—am as well to do, nay better—and have striven as hard to win ye, Mary. Why

throw yourself away upon a worthless reprobate ? ' "

" And who reviled me thus ? " I asked, burning with revenge.

" I find you apt, Tom Bright," returned the Stranger ; " and if your resolves be as steady as they are quick, Fate herself would find it hard to thwart your deeds. Upon this appeal," he continued, dropping his words slowly, one by one, " Mary—*your* Mary—placed her hand in that of her companion's, and said ——"

" No matter what ! " I exclaimed, unable to restrain my pent-up passion. " I 'll not listen to another syllable. Unhand me. Let me go."

" Will you not repent of ——"

" Nothing but the moments between me and my revenge," interrupted I, struggling to free myself from his hold.

" Then go thy way, Tom Bright," he rejoined, quitting his firm grasp upon my arm.

Fleeter than I had ever run before, I swept towards the trysting-spot beneath the old yew tree, and, although the moon was

now sailing high in the heavens, and bathing the earth in a flood of silvery light, Mary was not there. If possible to add to that which was already overflowing, this increased my bitterness of soul; and with the pricked and devilish spirit within me, I drew a knife, and, unclasping it, felt its whetted edge, and clutched the handle with fixed and steady purpose."

CHAPTER V.

“I will not hear thee speak:
I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool,
To shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield
To christian intercessors.”

RESTING against the trunk of the yew-tree, I listened with a loud and throbbing heart for the footfall of Mary's approach. The deep moaning of the breeze, bending the thick branches overhead, and throwing varied and sombre shadows on the ground, seemed like the sighs of the departed, slumbering together in death, perhaps as they had lived, in groups and singly. The ivy, twining with the grey moss, and hiding the rents and clefts in the time-worn church hard by, flapped and rustled in the sudden gusts with a harsh and grating noise. From

the tower a bur-r-r and a hum issued, as the wind swept through the bells, causing them to swing and jar with a damping and deadly sound. Cold as it was, from some sheltered nook and cranny the loud chirp of a cricket fell shrilly on the ear; and now and then, from far distant, the sharp bark of the watch-dog and bleating of the folded flock. All else was silent.

Whilst I stood, with the moon casting a long shade of my body from behind, I fancied, for a moment, that *two* shadows flitted on the ground. Turning sharply round, I expected to see her for whom I was waiting; but there was no one. "I could have almost sworn," observed I, mentally, bending my eyes again upon the shadow, "that I saw two."

There, however, was that, moving as I moved, and no other.

Impressed with this idea, I continued to gaze intently before me; and, as I looked, a shadow slowly parted from and left the reflection of myself, and then stood out clear and palpable. Again I turned my head to

seek the cause; but nothing met my view. There, however, were the two shadows, defined as if thrown from two substances. In a short time, and like dissolving mist, one faded from my sight, and then went and came thrice in the like manner.

Agape with fear, I staggered against the tree; the knife dropped from my opened palm; and instead of the fierce and ungovernable passion with which I had been filled, I felt stricken with terror and weakness. My blood stagnated in its course, and my trembling limbs all but sunk from under me. At this moment I heard footsteps rapidly and lightly approaching.

“Who comes?” I almost shrieked.

“’Tis me, Tom,” replied a well-known voice; and in an instant more, Mary threw herself into my arms. “I ’m out of breath, Tom, quite,” continued she; “for, knowing that I should be late, I ran every inch of the way.”

“And why,” said I, steadying my voice with an effort, “were you late?”

“Come, come,” rejoined she playfully,

“you must not scold me, Tom; nor will you, when you hear. To-night the young squire,—as was his right, you know—chose me for his partner; and, dance succeeding dance, I could not get away unobserved.”

“Indeed!” returned I.

“Nay, nay,” added Mary, “you should not deal thus harshly with me, Tom. I have often been at our trysting-place beforehand, and never reproached ye with look or word.”

To this I made no answer.

“What!” she exclaimed, “no word! Will you not give me a welcome, Tom?”

“No,” I replied. “Not one word of welcome. My tongue couldn’t utter it.”

“And why not?” returned she, bursting into tears. “Why not? Oh! tell me, Tom.”

“Because it would be a lie,” I responded.

“How cruel! how dreadfully cruel!” she ejaculated, convulsed with grief. “How have I offended you, Tom? Surely, not for being somewhat later than I said.”

“I ’m not so chary of my time,” rejoined I.

“What, then, is the matter?” asked Mary, with choking voice. “But great Heaven!” continued she, peering into my face, “How blanched your cheek is! Your lips, too, are bloodless!”

“And not without cause,” I replied.

“Then tell it me, I beseech you,” rejoined she. “Pray keep nothing from me.”

“Is it not enough to blanch my cheek,” said I, with returning anger, “and drive the colour from my lips, to know that you act the hypocrite with me?”

“How?” briefly inquired she.

“By turning your ear to another’s liking,” returned I. “By having double looks, and words, and sighs, and all the cunning of breaking honesty.”

“I’m amazed!” she exclaimed.

“Not more so than myself,” replied I.

“And who has dared to revile me thus?” rejoined Mary, her eyes flashing as she spoke.

“He who saw you,” added I; “if the truth can be called reviling.”

“You are deceived, Tom; indeed you are!” cried she.

"I may be," said I, "and yet believe that I am not. Answer me this. Did not some one reason with you to-night against your marriage with me?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"And you listened patiently to all that was said?"

"To every word," she returned, in a calm and collected manner.

"You expressed also a determination?"

"I did."

"You see," resumed I, in a sneering tone, "that I know more than you suspected."

"But not more than I wish you to know, Tom, or would have told you," said Mary.

"You must think me but dull of feeling, then," I replied.

"Not if the whole truth be told," she rejoined.

"I would not have the *whole* repeated," returned I, significantly. "It was enough to hear it once."

"Some strange deception has been practised with you, Tom," said Mary. "Hearken to what I have to say."

"I'll not listen to a word," returned I, distracted. "Not a sentence will I hear ye speak. You'd turn, and twist, and twine the truth, with the subtlety of the devil, to serve your ends, and laugh to make me a dull, blind, and mole-eyed fool."

"Now, Heaven help me!" ejaculated Mary.

"But," continued I, getting more frantic in my rage, "you shall not live to——"

I could say no more. Three shadows now streaked before us ; and one, with uplifted hand, pointed to the knife shining brightly at the foot of a newly-made grave.

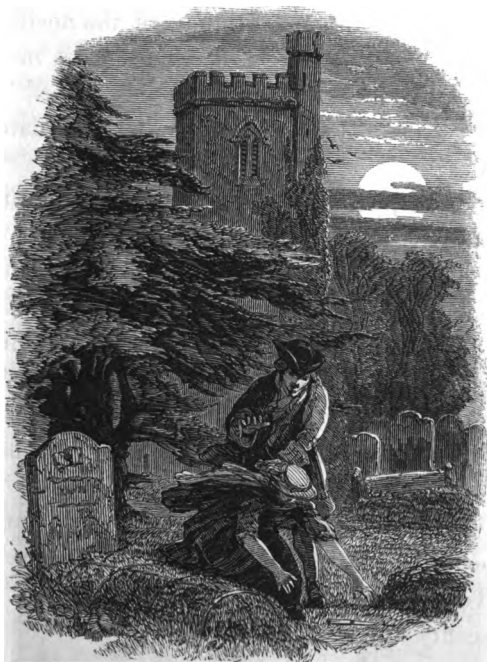
Burying my face in my hands, I uttered a groan of anguish, and should have fallen, had it not been for Mary's support.

"Your brain's distraught," said Mary, soothingly. "Calm and compose yourself, Tom. Be assured that there is nothing in reality to give you trouble."

"Look!" replied I. "Do you see nothing?"

"Nothing," rejoined she.

"Not on the ground?"



"Only our shadows," returned Mary, smiling.

"How many are there?" I inquired, with trembling voice.

"Two," she replied.

Assured by this, I hesitatingly raised my eyes; but there was the third, still in the same posture as before, pointing to the glittering blade on the green-sward.

"And cannot *you* see three?" asked I.

"No," she returned. "There are, and cannot be, but two. And yet, while I look," continued Mary, "something shines upon the grass. Let me pick it up."

"No," said I, trying to restrain her from stooping to seize the knife. "Touch it not;" but ere I could prevent her, it was in her hand.

"What 's this?" said Mary; "and how came it there?"

I could give no answer.

"It 's a knife," continued she, in a tone betokening fear, "and one that I have often seen you use, Tom."

"Have you?" rejoined I, vacantly.

“Is it not so?” inquired Mary.

“It may be,” I replied, watching with a fixed stare the third shadow, now waxing dim, and at length fading altogether from my sight.

“How came it there?” she repeated, with faltering voice.

“I know not,” returned I, confused. “Perhaps by accident.”

“May God forgive ye, Tom!” added she, with the quick perception of a woman; “*I* do, with all my soul. *Accident!* Oh, Tom! it freezes me to think of the purpose for which it was brought. The fears pourtrayed this morning and to-night; the causeless passion and threatened words; the wild look and desperate thought; all tell, too well, the reason of its being there—fallen from a hand, thank Heaven! still unprepared to do a deed of blood.”

As if my memory had suddenly become a void and blank, I could not summons a single word of defence or palliation; but there I stood motionless and dumb-founded.

“And could you, Tom,” said Mary—and

every word dropped witheringly to my heart, —“could you think of taking the life of her whom you had promised—so faithfully promised—to love, and cherish, and protect? —and that, too, without cause—without one act, word, or thought in opposition to your will? Here, before HIM who knows the secrets of all human hearts, and the grave of her whose pride, whilst living, was that I never told a falsehood, I swear not to have given ye reason for one angry or jealous pang. If I have listened to another’s suit, it has been to give this one reply—that I loved, and only could love, you, Tom.”

I could not speak.

“Well may you hear,” she resumed, “a voice that others cannot. Well may you see shadows which are sightless, save to your eyes. They are the mockeries of your guilty thoughts—the reproaches and reflections of an accusing conscience.”

“I ’m mad!” exclaimed I. “Mad—quite mad!”

“’Tis but a sorry excuse, Tom,” replied Mary, shaking her head with a sad expres-

sion, "and yet one that is often used. If scope and rein be given to evil passions, impulses, and furious resentment, men, now-a-days, say they 're mad. Under this plea, the worst of crimes are screened, and even the perpetrators of them meet with sympathy, instead of well-merited punishment. I've heard," she continued, "that there is but little method in unseated reason. You did not forget to sharpen the edge of this knife, Tom, before coming hither."

I felt the guilty wretch I was, and could say nothing.

"This morning," she resumed, "you asked for the forgiveness of the anxious trouble you had given me of late; and to-night you were to meet me here, and supplicate for pardon from your offended God. Instead of the meek and gentle penitent, ready to acknowledge and confess his sinful transgressions, I find ye possessed of dark and desperate thoughts, guilty fears, jealousy, anger, and revenge. Here, at our trysting-spot, where we have so often met, I find ye came with a hand prepared to sink your

soul into eternal perdition with a deed too shocking to repeat. Oh, Tom!" exclaimed she, sobbing with grief, "what can have changed ye thus?"

I was about to reply, and crave forgiveness, when the third shadow again sprang larger and darker than before at my feet, and, with uplifted hand and nodding head, waved me towards Mary.

As if carved from wood or stone, I stood regarding the shade, but felt deprived of the power to either move or speak.

"Can it be that you are lost, quite lost?" said Mary. "Has your heart become so stubborn and hardened, as to reject the forgiveness promised to all who seek it? Let me fervently hope," she continued, "and constantly pray, that it may not be so. And yet, until some proof be given of your repentance and reclamation, we will not meet again, Tom. I know what you would say," added she, sorrowfully, as I clasped my hands, and fell upon my knees in despair. "Let your petition be addressed, as you now kneel, humbly and penitently, but not

to *me*. Farewell, Tom!" and quitting me with hurried step, I was left alone—and yet two shadows still were there.

When her retreating footsteps were no longer heard, I started to my feet, and rushed with the speed which only terror lends, from the dreaded, and, to me, awe-stricken place. Over mound and grave, and through the boundary-hawthorn fence, I flew without a thought as to whither I should go for a retreat from my maddening fears. To run, to get away, was the impulse to which every nerve, thew, and sinew, were strained to the utmost, and on I swept like a stag with the hound's fangs snapping at his haunch.

Upon gaining some four or five hundred yards from the church-yard, I turned my head to see if the terrible shadow followed in my footsteps. Yes, there were still two, one blacker than the other, and both gliding with me at every stride. Words cannot picture the horror that I felt! Faster yet I hurried wildly on. Through brake and briar, and jumping gate, fence, stile, and

ditch, I cleared all obstacles in my path with the ease of thought. Now climbing the hill-top, then dipping into the vale, and skirting dark, deep woods, I raced with breathless speed. Ever and anon, I glanced behind, and there the shadow dogged me still. Useless as it appeared, I continued on. I could not, dare not stop.

At length, after scouring over a wide heath, on which I heard the sharp bark of the fox and the scream of the night-hawk, and plunging through a quivering morass, my exhausted limbs began to reel and totter. In desperation I turned upon my heel and faced the shadow. There it was, streaked in my wake, and nodding its head as if in triumph. With the courage of a pent-up rat I stood glaring at the dreaded shade, and, growing desperate with my very fears, I began to curse and defy it. My impotent rage, however, produced no other effect than to cause it to increase its mocking gestures.

The moon, which had been sailing in the clear blue firmament with no impediment to her rays, now began to sink behind a bank

of murky clouds ; and as she gradually grew paler, the hideous cause of my terror faded with the light, and, at length, no trace was left in the thick and deepening darkness.

Relieved from the presence of the shadow, I tried to collect my wandering and shattered senses, and sought the nearest path homewards. Many a weary mile had to be retraced ; and as I came to the door of my once-peaceful home, the crow of a watchful cock announced that the first streak of morn just tinged the east.

CHAPTER VI.

“ The fated sky
Gives us free scope ; only doth backward pull
Our slow designs, when we ourselves are dull.”

ON this night it appeared, that soon after my departure for the appointed place with Mary, the Stranger returned to the inn, and without intimating his intention, left it; neither saying whither he was going, or having told any one from whence he came. The evil change, however, of his having been amongst us did not leave with him. The Chequers now was frequented nightly instead of generally but once in the week, and riot prevailed often from sunset to sunrise. Our daily work was neglected; and many, after repeated warning and cautions, were discharged by their employers, and be-

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came idle, dissolute, and abandoned. Among the most so was myself. The separation from Mary, the fear of the past still besetting me, and the utter hopelessness of the future, all tended to render me hardened and desperate. To drown every thought and feeling of remorse, I sought the coward's remedy in drink, and as soon as its effects were leaving me, drank again.

As may be supposed, from my repeated, and, indeed, constant intemperance, now a fixed habit of my life, Mary rejected every effort on my part to again become reconciled.

"No, Tom," was her constant answer. "I cannot place any faith in your assurances to amend. Prove that you are so, and you shall have my hand—as, notwithstanding all that's past, you still have my heart. When your reformation has really begun, and you are a better man, seek me, if it be your will. Until then, spare both yourself and me the pang of meeting."

Heaven knows, it was my intention to commence a change for the better, and my resolutions were as honest as ever ex-

pressed; but somehow or other there appeared to be an influence over me which prevented their fulfilment, and I still continued in the ring of ruin and misery.

It is seldom, I have been told, that men fall deeply into sin at once. From step to step they sink; and crimes, at length, are committed, which to contemplate at an earlier stage of their corruption, would fill them with fear and horror.

With several of my companions, I soon became out of work, and devoid of all means of procuring an honest livelihood. No one would give me employment, even for a day; and I wandered idly about, with the feelings of one forsaken alike by God and man.

Whilst leaning against a gate one evening, thinking what could be done to relieve my necessities, daily becoming more pressing and urgent, a thought struck me that to snare a few head of game would be the most ready mode of getting my wants supplied. Not that I then intended to practise poaching, but merely as a temporary resource and assistance. In order to quell the scruples of

conscience, I reasoned with myself that there could be no harm in taking that which was wild, and scarcely to be deemed the property of any one until killed. What I should take, too, would not be missed; and therefore the wrong, if any, must be of the most trifling description. This plausible argument silenced every doubt, and, like those whose inclinations are to carry out their resolves, I found a ready palliative for all compunction.

Without divulging my intention to any one, I prepared wire and nets, and upon one bright frosty night set out on my first marauding adventure, accompanied only by my old shepherd's dog. For although he had never hunted, or driven anything except the flock, which at one time he watched and guarded; yet such was his sagacity, as, indeed, it is of the whole of his breed, that I knew he could be depended upon for anything told or directed for him to do.

Avoiding all roads in which it was probable that I might be seen, I made the best of my way to a cover the most likely to be

free from the squire's keepers, and from every interruption to my proceedings. The incidents of that night are as fresh in my memory as those of this. Shep's shadow, as he tracked closely to my heels, often made me turn with a throb of fear; and the rustle of the twigs and bushes, as I passed along, sent the blood hotly to my brow and cheeks. My footfall, too, seemed much louder than its wont, and, tread as softly as I would, the pebbles cracked and broke from under me. Now and then a scared rabbit sprang from cropping the weed and clover to a securer retreat, and, as it flashed across my path, I started with a tremor through every nerve within me. Such were the little causes acting on suspicious and guilty fear.

Upon arriving on the verge of the wood, I bent my head to listen if there was any one within its precincts; but all that could be heard was the flapping among the seared leaves still clinging to bough and branch, and the slight moan of the wind humming through them. No living thing

broke the stillness of the night. Deep, unbroken silence reigned.

Having frequently worked in and about the wood, I was well acquainted with the creeps and meshes made by the game, and those most likely to be used in either leaving or entering it. In a short time I had fixed the snares in the best way that my inexperience would permit; and then proceeded to hang the nets on the gates of those fields close at hand, in which the hares were probably feeding. As I placed the last net, a pigeon whir-r-d from the topmost branch of a fir just above my head, and with an exclamation I jumped from the ground terror-stricken. Now from every quarter of the wood the flap of their wings might be heard, and their fleet pinions whistled through the air as each sped to a more peaceful roost.

Enraged with myself at causing this untimely interruption to my labours, I gave vent to my passion in a volley of oaths, not the less bitter from being muttered between my teeth.

"I'll fear nothing more," said I—"neither on the earth, above, nor under it. Come what will, come what may; a ban or a blessing shall be all the same to me."

It might have been the dried limb of a tree falling at this moment in splinters to the ground, but something crashed and echoed through the wood with a strange and jarring sound. Instead, however, of creating the fear which it would have done even a few seconds since, I felt my heart steeled, and repeated—

"A ban or a blessing shall be all the same to me."

"Ho, ho, ho!"

I could have heard the snapping of a spider's web. There could be no mistaking that hollow and empty mockery of a laugh. It was the one which had so jarred upon my ear before, and shaken me like a feather in the breeze. For one brief moment a thrill, cold and piercing, shot through my frame; but it was for a moment only. Desperation will make the craven bold, and whether I

possessed the coward's heart or not, I at least now had a reckless one.

As I still listened in expectation of hearing the laugh repeated, my eyes chanced to glance at the dog squatting at my feet. He evidently had not been disturbed by the sound ; for there he crouched with his nose buried between his fore-paws, and his eyes were listlessly half closed.

"Hist, Shep," said I in a whisper ; and the dog sprang instantly upon his feet, and pricking his ears, turned his head sharply round.

After waiting for a short time, Shep came close to me, and, rubbing his head against my legs, wagged his tail as much as to say, "There is nothing to hearken to."

"You're right," said I, communing with myself. "It is my own Will-o'-the-Wisp childish and womanish fear. Henceforth neither sounds nor shadows shall have any dread for me. I'll laugh at the one and spit at the other, and reck nothing for either."

So saying, I took a full flask from a pocket,

and pouring its stinging contents down my throat, felt that I could have faced the devil.

My attention was now again entirely devoted to the object for which I came. Having planted my snares and nets, I made for the neighbouring fields for the purpose of driving the game, then feeding, into them.

My first attempts to obtain Shep's assistance proved to be of no avail, and I began to fear that I should have to depend only upon the success of the wires when the hares returned to cover at daybreak. But after repeated trials, Shep appeared to possess a notion of the duty required of him, and bounding away he scoured across a field. As if afraid, however, that he had committed an error, he quickly returned to my heels, and it was a few minutes before I could urge him again to the trial. At length away he went, and immediately afterwards one sharp bark and a rushing noise announced that he had something afoot.

I was standing within a short distance of a net tilted against a stile leading to the wood, when a hare swept by me,

and rushing headlong into the meshes, rolled over and over like a ball. Shep was close to her scut; and as she became entangled, he snapped her from the ground dead at one gripe. Flushed with the success of my first attempt, I continued beating the fields; and Shep, entering into the spirit of the work, quickly drove a brace more into the trammels.

The moon was now fast sinking; and having taken up my nets, I proceeded to examine the snares. These, however, held nothing; and, satisfied with what I had, I left the spot where, for the first time in my life, I broke the law and committed crime.

Through a long and twining lane, flanked by two high and sloping banks, I was striding with my ill-gotten booty, when Shep gave a long, deep growl. In the belief that some one might be coming, I crept under a thick holly bush, and ordered him to lie by the side of me. Nobody appearing, however, and nothing strange to be heard, I was about to leave my hiding-place, when the dog squeaked and trembled as if in great

fear, and endeavoured to squeeze himself behind my back.

“What is the matter?” said I, seizing him by the neck, and throwing him savagely from me. No sooner had I done so, than setting up a most frightful howl, he rushed away, making the hideous noise ring far and near.

Without speculating for a moment as to the cause of this ill-timed terror, I scrambled on my feet, fearing that I might be discovered; and, changing my path, hastened on my way.

CHAPTER VII.

"I'll not meddle with it, it is a dangerous thing; it makes a man a coward: a man cannot steal, but it accuseth him; a man cannot swear, but it checks him. 'Tis a blushing, shame-faced spirit, that mutinies in a man's bosom; it fills one full of obstacles; it beggars any man that keeps it; it is turned out of all towns and cities for a dangerous thing; and every man that means to live well, endeavours to trust to himself, and live without it."

"LIGHT come, light go," is an old saw, but one particularly applicable to my oft-repeated depredations on the game. Becoming skilful from continued practice, and lost to all conscientious scruples, I nightly returned loaded with my ill-gotten gains, which the host of the Chequers mainly profited by. From speculating on the ways and means enabling me to scatter the

money freely, my companions set a watch upon my movements, and quickly discovered the secret by which, from penury and want, I suddenly became a spendthrift. As a matter of course, all resolved to enrich themselves by following my example ; and, in a short time, a gang of poachers was formed, of which I was the appointed leader. At first every caution was used in avoiding detection ; but becoming more careless and daring from habit, we soon depended more upon the strength of our band in resisting any attempt that might be made to molest or capture us, than in the secrecy of our proceedings. Reports were quickly circulated in the neighbourhood and the country round, relative to our acts, and exaggerated statements made as to their extent and violence. Gamekeepers quaked with fear when there was a whispered probability of a visit from us ; and although many talked of their desire to meet, and defied our coming, we always found them absent from the spots chosen for our spoliations. At length, from the hardihood and boldness with which we

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defied all authority, it was determined to bring a superior force to ours, and by one great effort to annihilate the organized and lawless band.

This scheme, however, was far more easily concocted than carried out. In consequence of the information given by one employed to assist in our capture, we were enabled to elude the most vigilant endeavours; and having recourse to various manœuvres, such as guns being fired in a contrary direction to where we were going, dropping hints of plans not intended to be pursued, and practising all the cunning within our knowledge, every attempt was frustrated. But the course of crime, whatever may be its seeming prosperity, has but narrow limits. The informer, to whom we were so greatly indebted for innumerable escapes, was suspected of being in league with us, and, being bribed, confessed the truth. The rest is told in the adventures of one night.

The place appointed for our gathering together was not likely to be visited by any

one, save ourselves, at the hour of midnight. There were enough wild legends told of the Devil's Shaft, without the skeleton on the gibbet hard by, announcing the deed of blood of which it was once the scene, to keep the hardiest from its precincts, even at noontide. The steep chasm delved to nearly an hundred feet, with scarcely more slope or ledge than that of a well; and at the bottom was a black, slimy, and stagnant pool, in which no light from heaven was ever seen to glisten. Amidst the long rank grass toads croaked hoarsely, and spotted evets crawled in loathsome numbers. On the sides a few broad dock-leaves sprouted; but not the meanest wild flower that grows, not even a daisy, opened a blossom there. From about the middle of the abyss, a stunted ash, with its bared roots clinging like spider's legs to the declivity, reared a few withered branches; but no green leaf ever budded upon that blighted tree. Within some dozen yards of the brink, and just over the spot where the victim—a woman, and all but a mother—was hurled by the re-

morseless hand of her seducer, a tall gallows stood, and on it the bleached bones of the murderer swayed in the wind, dangled in rusty clanking chains.

Upon my arriving at the Devil's Shaft, I found my companions already assembled, and was surprised to hear, as I approached, sounds of laughter—for it was a spot in which few would feel disposed to be mirthful in.

“ The jest should be broad or good, to cause fun here,” said I. “ What is it ? ”

“ Ay,” replied one. “ With that music in his ears,” continued he, pointing to the skeleton, harshly grating in its links, “ a man could scarcely jest, I’m thinking.”

“ And yet,” rejoined I, “ some of ye seem to have done so.”

“ But not here, Tom Bright,” returned the speaker.

“ Then why laugh so loud ? ” added I.

“ Laugh ! ” exclaimed another. “ It must be a long time ago since a laugh was heard in this quarter.”

"I heard it but now," said I, "within twenty paces of where I stand."

"Then you possessed a privilege which we didn't enjoy," remarked a third. "Instead of being anything like merry, we were grumbling at your tardiness, and thought the moonlight was being wasted to little purpose."

"No matter," replied I; "not another moment shall be lost. Head for Kilnwood."

"Well said, Tom Bright!" ejaculated several of my comrades. "We shall do more there to-night than in a week elsewhere."

As we left, I chanced to glance at the skeleton; and the white bones, looking as clear as glass in the flood of light, appeared to change to a dark colour, and in an instant more took the form of the mysterious Stranger. Throwing his limbs wildly about, he waved them in an exulting manner, and his eyes glowed like two livid coals.

"See!" said I, pointing to the gibbet, and turning my head away.

"Well," replied one, as all stopped to my

order. "It's a harmless sight enough," continued he; "but anything but an agreeable one."

I again snatched a look. There was the skeleton as before—but nothing else!

Recovering my self-possession, I betrayed no emotion, but led the way in silence.

The cover selected on this memorable night was known to contain an abundance of game, and, according to the statement made by the informer, left completely unguarded.

He said, indeed, that the *ruse* made use of by us to lead our wary enemies miles away, had succeeded to the utmost extent of the design, and that Kilnwood might be drained of every head without the slightest chance of interruption. Having relied on his former statements, and finding them always in accordance with the truth, we placed the greatest confidence in his intelligence, and were guided entirely by it.

As we entered the wood in an extended line, armed with guns and bludgeons, we began the work at once by firing at the pheasants roosting on the trees, clearly to

be seen against the light. The brushwood was so thick and high, that we could only move slowly forward step by step; and the entangled briar and brambles rendered this a matter of some difficulty. When about the centre of the cover, and each was heavily loaded with the spoil, I thought that I heard an unknown voice say—

“ Ready?”

“ Who was that spoke?” asked I.

No one answered.

“ Did anybody speak?” said I.

“ Not that I heard,” replied a companion close to me.

“ I fancied,” rejoined I, “ that some one said ‘ Ready!’ ”

“ And you’re right,” returned the voice; and, at the same moment, men sprang from the brushwood in every direction, and, from a preconcerted plan, hemmed us in in a circle, before we could recover from our surprise.

“ Stand back,” cried I, “ or, by Heaven, we’ll send ye a quittance both sharp and certain!”

“ Shall we fire?” said one of my com-

rades as each stood with his piece levelled, and his finger pressed upon the ready trigger.

"No," hallooed I.

"Tom Bright," said the same voice, in a clear and distinct tone, "that reply may be the saving of your neck."

"Whoever you are," returned I, "don't think that we're to be taken easily. Stir not an inch. The first who approaches, I'll drive an ounce of lead through his heart."

"Listen to me," rejoined the speaker. "We are more than two to your one, and as determined as yourselves. We possess as stout hearts and limbs, and are armed as well, if not better. If blood must be shed, let it rest—and it will, as it always does—on the heads of those who cause it. I would not have," continued he, "a finger pricked; but rather than be turned from our purpose of taking ye, I'd spill the last drop in my own body."

"Then you will," briefly added I.

"Perhaps so," continued he, in the same distinct and collected tone, whilst every one else remained silent. "At the same time,

little benefit will accrue to your cause by such a result. You don't recognise me?"

"It's the Squire himself!" was whispered from one to another, and instantly each dropped the butt of his gun upon the ground.

The truth flashing upon me, I replied, as well as my surprise and discomfiture would permit, that—"I then did."

"Well," observed the Squire, "will you submit peaceably to the consequences of your lawless career so long uninterrupted, or must we come to cuffs and hard knocks?"

"Can you give me a minute's consideration, sir?" said I.

"Twenty," he replied, "if required. But remember this," continued the Squire: "whatever has been done, for which the laws provide a punishment, shall be atoned for. Think not to conciliate, by any exercise of forbearance now, for what is past."

"Still, sir," replied one of my companions, trembling to find by whom he was confronted, "you'll deal mercifully with us?"

"Justice should be always tempered with

mercy," rejoined the Squire; "but there is no mercy in ill-judged clemency. You've offended against your laws, knowingly and deliberately," said he, sternly, "and for which you shall—mark my words—I say, *shall* receive the meed of just retribution, and no more. At least ye must admit that I deal honestly by ye."

"You hear," said I, appealing to my terror-stricken associates, in an under tone, "the hopes held out, and you know the danger into which we have fallen, as well as I do. What is your decision?—surrender—fight—or run?"

"I say, fight!" replied Harry Bluff, the most desperate of the whole. "If numbers are against us—what then? We must fight the harder."

"Let us throw down our arms and give in," rejoined a second. "If we came to a struggle, we should be beaten; and if any accident occurred, some might find themselves dancing on a hempen cord, with the air for a footboard."

"Better run," suggested a third. "To

fight will make matters worse, and surrendering in no way improve our prospects. Let 's give them our heels."

" So say I," added a fourth. " Some will get clear, and better a few than none should escape."

" We always said that we'd stick by one another," returned he inclined for fighting, " and that the fate of one should be the fate of all. Your tone is soon changed, my masters."

" But even you, Harry Bluff, wouldn't raise a hand against the Squire?" observed I.

" Perhaps not," he replied, " unless we came too close together, and then I wouldn't answer for what I'd do."

" What think you best, Tom?" inquired one who had not before spoken.

" Ay, ay," responded several. " Let 's hear what he has to say."

" As far as myself is concerned," I replied, " it matters but little; for you hear that I am known, and consequently, sooner or later, I must pay the penalty."

" But for the rest, Tom, the rest," inter-

rupted one of the most impatient to escape the consequences.

“ The case is different,” continued I. “ For aught we know, I am the only man identified ; and, therefore, all those who escape being captured now, will probably get clear of punishment.”

“ I ’ll make a dash for it, at any rate,” said Harry Bluff, “ and ill betide him who stands in my way.”

“ My advice is, however,” resumed I, “ to use no unnecessary violence, and none but that which your clenched hands will give. Lighten yourselves of the game, drop your guns and sticks ; and when I clap my hands, rush together at the point in an opposite direction to the Squire, and make the best of your way.”

“ Have you decided, Tom Bright ? ” asked the Squire.

“ Yes, sir,” I replied ; and bringing my hands loudly together, away we swept in a body. So unexpectedly and suddenly was our plan carried into effect, that we had broken through the ring of those surrounding us

before they were aware even of our intentions. A few heavy blows, and down rolled every one attempting to stop us, and a start of many yards had been gained before any attempt was made in pursuit.

"The rascals!" I heard the Squire exclaim. "A hundred pounds for each one taken!"

"Stand, and fire!" shouted a loud voice.

"No, no, no," hallooed the Squire; "I'll not have bloodshed. Follow on and take them, if ye can."

Through the deep cover we rushed, tearing apart the entangled brushwood, and snapping many a bough and twig in our way. Each following the course which he deemed the best suited for escape, we soon became separated; and by the time that I leaped the fence forming the barrier of the cover, no one was near me. A deep, blind ditch, covered thickly over with brush and brambles, presented a favourable spot for hiding myself in, and sliding to the bottom, I crouched to listen for what would follow.

For some minutes shout followed shout, and the heavy tread of the pursuing and pursued sounded hollow on the ground; but from what I could hear, all of my companions seemed to have effected an escape.

It was full three hours before I ventured to leave my hiding-place; and as I did so a shrill, low whistle was given, which a stranger might have taken for the first note of a wakeful mavis. So cautiously was it sounded, that, at first, I was in doubt whether it was the signal used amongst us or not; but, being repeated, I answered in the same way, and immediately afterwards Harry Bluff sprang from over a fence, and stood before me.

“Ha, Tom!” said he, “we ’re well met.”

“Where are the others?” inquired I.

“Scattered like chaff in the wind by this time, I expect,” he replied.

“Were any taken?” I asked.

“None,” replied he, “although I had a narrow chance. The head,” continued Harry, laughingly, “that I tapped must have been brainless before.”

“ Tell me what was done, after your getting away,” returned I.

“ When we had outrun them, and all was quiet, by twos and threes we collected again together at the Shaft,” said he, “ with the exception of yourself. It was the belief of some that you had been nabbed; but I thought, and said, you were too old a fox to be run into, and expected to find ye earthed, as I did, in or about this quarter.”

“ And what has become of the rest?” said I.

“ All agreed that these parts were now too hot to hold them,” replied Harry, “ and each has left within the last half hour, to seek the luck that strange ones may bring.”

“ Has every one gone?” inquired I.

“ Not a soul remains but you and I, Tom,” he rejoined. “ They waited some time in the hope of your coming, but as daybreak approached, thought no further time was to be lost, and each started on his way.

“And it’s time for us to go, too,” added I.

“I’ll not budge an inch,” returned Harry.

“It’s sorely against my will,” said I. “Sorely against my will.”

“Then why leave?” asked my companion.

“Because I shall be hunted,” I rejoined, “and have no place to hide or rest in.”

“That will be your end elsewhere,” said Harry, “as it must be mine.”

“Not if we give no cause,” replied I.

“Oh, no!” said he, with a chuckle; “certainly not, if we work, and sweat, and toil, for poor fare and little drink.”

“Better that,” I returned, “than lead the life we do.”

“Perhaps so,” added Harry; “but it doesn’t agree with some folks, and I’m one of ’em.”

“Then follow your own bent,” said I, “and I’ll follow mine.”

“The world’s wide enough, it’s true,” replied he, “without jostling against him who doesn’t want your company; but I

thought, perhaps, we might be of service to each other."

"In what way?" said I.

"The same that we 've followed for some time past," he rejoined.

"Since our party's broken up," I returned, "and the watch which will now be kept, I'll never poach another head."

"Nor I either," said Harry. "It's too slow a way of getting money to suit me any longer."

"Then what do you propose doing?" replied I.

"It's scarcely worth while to mention it," rejoined he, indifferently, "since ye seem to be struck moral all of a sudden."

"I must live," said I.

"Some people mightn't see the necessity for it," returned Harry.

"True enough," added I; "but I do."

"I am glad to hear ye say so," responded he. "So long as a man wishes to live, there's some hopes of him: there's what may be called meat on his bones. But the moment he begins to feel careless of life, the

sooner he's dead the better. For my part," continued Harry, "I'd rather see my best friend stretched in his coffin than hear him talk of dying."

"But what is this plan of yours?" inquired I.

"Better learn it by degrees," replied he. "A sudden plunge might take your breath away."

"Let me know it now," I rejoined, "as my steps may be governed at once by what you say."

"You're cold, damp, and weary, Tom," returned he, "which is poor condition for listening. Take my advice; come with me, and I'll put ye into a snug warm bed, where there shall be no trail to find ye by. At night, when refreshed and hearty, you shall hear what I have to say; and then if the scheme doesn't suit, why you can take your own course, and do as the rest have done—go farther off to fare worse."

"That I think scarcely possible," said I.

"Well, well!" replied Harry. "Opinions differ in all matters."

"However," added I, "I'll do as you wish, and decide by-and-by whether to stay or go."

"Then come with me," he rejoined, "and you shall be safer than if you were buried underground."

CHAPTER VIII.

“ The image of a wicked, heinous fault
Lives in his eye; that close aspect of his
Does shew the mood of a much-troubled breast.”

HARRY BLUFF had not yet reached thirty ; but from the deep lines marked in his forehead and cheeks, he bore the appearance of being many years older. With a thick-set wiry frame, he possessed a savage and reckless spirit ; and his large round head, placed upon a pair of brawny shoulders, looked like that of a bull dog. Set in deep protruding sockets, shaded with shaggy hair, were two small grey twinkling eyes, which, from their restlessness, seemed incapable of sleep ; and his thick protruding lips were ever fixed together in a determined sullen expression.

“ Ho, Tom ! ” exclaimed a voice. “ Why, lad, ye ’ll sleep till ye wake up grey ! ”

Startled by the shout, I awoke from my profound slumber on Harry’s bed, and saw that he was sitting on the edge of it, occupied in boring a hole in the butt end of a heavy cudgel.

“ Have I slept long ? ” inquired I.

“ Long ! ” he repeated, laughing ; “ You turned in at break of day, and here it is as black as my hat. A good twelve hours’ spell.”

“ Some must watch, while some may sleep,” rejoined I ; “ and it seems that I have done the latter part to some purpose.”

“ And I the first,” returned he. “ A pair of quick ears I thought might be useful just at the present time.”

“ Has all been quiet ? ” asked I.

“ There hasn’t been noise enough, the live-long day, to scare a mouse,” replied Harry.

“ There will be presently,” said I, “ or I shall be very much mistaken.”

“ But not disappointed,” replied Harry.

“ But come,” continued he, “ take a crust and a horn ; they ’ll put ye in heart.”

“What have you being doing to employ yourself?” I asked, accepting his offer.

“Preparing a few tools,” responded he, whirling his cudgel dexterously above his head, “and thinking how I could best use them.”

“You were always too disposed for a fray,” rejoined I. “There isn’t enough caution in ye.”

“I’m far from being a tame Christian,” returned Harry, “and won’t deny a slight partiality for breaking a head or two now and then. It stirs my blood, and makes one feel pleasant and comfortable.”

“I suppose, then,” added I, “that you are preparing that bludgeon for indulging yourself in a treat.”

“Yes,” he replied, lifting a ladle of molten lead from the hearth, and pouring it into the hollow scooped in the weapon. “I’m taking great pains to make this very handy and useful.”

“For general purposes, or a particular one?” inquired I.

“Particular,” briefly said he. “Very particular.”

“Am I to be trusted with it or not?” returned I.

“Oh, yes,” added he; “it’s the very one which I’ve got in store for ye.”

“Then, without further beating about the bush,” replied I, “let me learn it.”

“I like a man to be eager,” said Harry, holding out his finished cudgel, and regarding it with admiration. “It looks like business to find him sharp and ready. Well, Tom,” he continued, folding his arms, and settling himself in his seat; “by way of a beginning I must hark back a step or two, but not so many as to tire your patience. I said this morning that, in my opinion, our friends and mates had gone farther to fare worse, and that I wouldn’t budge an inch. It was my intention to add, although that didn’t appear to me the time to do so, ‘not until my pockets were better lined.’ Opportunities should never be neglected; and if we don’t catch the pumpkin when up, it comes down squash. Now, it so happens,

that Farmer Cutworth boasted over his cups at the Chequers, a few evenings since, that he should take money at the market to-day for a hundred quarters of wheat. A hundred quarters of wheat!" repeated Harry Bluff, letting his words drop one by one.

"Proceed," said I.

"Farmer Cutworth always returns from market," he replied, "not quite so sober as when he goes to it."

"And you would take advantage of his state by easing him of his purse," rejoined I.

"And will," returned he.

"Then you 'll do it alone, Harry," added I.

"That depends upon yourself," said he. "If you 'll join me, we 'll share and share alike : I can't say fairer."

"I 'll have no hand in such a business," I replied, angrily ; "and if I had thought that any such cut-throat work would have been proposed, I 'd have been miles from here by this time."

"Smooth your hackles, Tom," said he,

"there 's no harm done. You can start on your way without the loss of a minute."

We exchanged no word for some time. At length Harry proffered me a flask, and said in a calmer tone—

"The night 's cold and cheerless ; take a dram."

"It may be the last that we shall drink together," replied I.

"Then it should be drunk, as it will be, in good liquor," rejoined he ; "for we have taken many a stoup."

"Now," said I, after pledging him, "I 'll turn my heel for long, and it may be aye."

"Don't be in haste," returned Harry. "The moon will sink early, and darkness may suit your travelling better than the light. Where will ye sleep to-night?"

"I know not," added I, "and care little."

"The quarters may be rough," said he. "Take some more drink; it will harden ye."

It was seldom that I required a second invitation to quaff strong liquor, and the cup was filled and emptied until my brain began to reel. As I sat on the settle,

watching with swimming eyes the flickering flames upon the hearth, they seemed to change of a sudden to a blue colour, as if sulphur had been thrown upon the embers. The room, too, became flaring with light, and Harry Bluff's form changed into that of the Stranger's. Mute with fear and amazement, I stared at him, and he returned the gaze with a fixed and steadfast look.

"Who—what are ye?" I gasped at length.

"Your friend, Tom Bright," he replied, "and one who has been close to you for a long time past."

"I hate—"

"Men often do," interrupted he, "those who would serve them best."

"Devil—"

"Call me what you please," again interrupted he; "I would as soon it to be devil, as anything else."

"How and why do ye haunt me thus?" said I, in an agony of dread.

"Because, Tom Bright," replied he, dropping his voice to a whisper, and

leaning forwards in his seat, until his breath steamed into my face; "because, Tom Bright," he repeated, in a measured, deliberate tone, "like many another man, you sent for me. I never come unless called."

"Sent for ye!" I ejaculated.

"Ay," rejoined he, "often. Mortals summon me in many ways, but in none more directly than yours."

I was about to question him when he waved his hand for silence, and continued—

"Let your own conscience answer what you would ask," said he. "Unheeded warnings, broken resolutions, repeated crimes, and postponed repentance, are, all and each, welcomes to me."

"But you are not welcome," I returned. "You're hateful to my sight."

"Many express the same opinion," quietly added he, "and yet practically deny its truth. As I once told ye before," he continued, "men's tongues oftener conceal their thoughts than give expression to them; and, therefore, in words I put little trust. It is

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by their *works* I judge whether my presence be desired or not."

"For the future you shall have reason to alter your belief," observed I, regaining composure.

"Then its reflection must be very different to that of the past, Tom Bright," replied he; "and pardon me if I entertain some doubts of it."

"I 'm going from here," I remarked, "and behind me shall be cast every idle and evil habit."

"I knew that you were leaving to-night," said he, "which was the chief cause of my being here to give ye a bit of parting advice. You 're penniless?"

"Quite so," I replied.

"Ha!" returned he. "Some have too much, and some too little. Money is but poorly balanced in the scale of merit."

"What advice would you give me?" inquired I.

"To put money in your pocket," rejoined he, "by the readiest mode in your power."

"But honestly."

“If ye can,” continued he quickly.

“And if not?”

“Still put money in your pocket,” returned he.

“Can you tell me how?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “Break a head, or cut a throat.”

I looked at him to see if he was serious.

“I mean what I say,” resumed he, “and generally do. Men are often startled at the same suggestion, although to rack a brain until it withers with its sorrow—to blight life with imperishable misery—to uproot all hope and joy, and memory’s store of treasured consolations—is a deed far more cruel, if not so bloody; and yet how many such are daily recorded in that huge volume, the annals of man’s selfishness! The needy wretch whose knife lets out the current of life, and thereby with it all pains and penalties, is regarded with shivering horror. Women uplift their eyes and hands at the mention of his name, and children huddle together in fear and trembling. But he who stabs with cunning and hypocrisy, and fattens in secret on

human sufferings—who robs the widow of her mite, and the orphan of her dole—may pass with the throng as good, exemplary, and honest. Such is the false measure by which mortals scan the actions of their fellows.”

“But what has this to do with my getting money ?” asked I.

“Much,” replied he. “You were about stating your scruples against following my plan, and I wished to shew that there were other means of getting money—and commonly practised, too — more heinous than those of murder !”

“I ’m not the less opposed to it,” I rejoined.

“Perhaps so,” returned he ; “but we shall not differ on that account. Harry Bluff proposed a little matter of business.”

“He did,” added I.

“And you declined having a share in it. Well !” continued he, without waiting for a further reply, “come with me, and we ’ll see what is to be done.”

I was about asking him where Harry was,

and how he came to be in his place, without my seeing the exchange made; but before being able to do so, the Stranger crossed the threshold of the cottage door, and beckoned me to follow him.

The night was gloomy and desolate. A wild fitful blast swept shrieking over a waste of snow, making the trees stand out in the wan light like shrouded spectres. Not a star broke through the murky clouds above; and the thick sleet, drifting with the wind, added to the cold and cheerless scene.

In no humour to speak, and treading in the footsteps of the Stranger, who strode before me at a pace which made it difficult to keep up with him, I followed his guidance in silence. As if under the influence of some magic power, I felt myself entirely under his control, and my feet mechanically filled his prints left in the deep and feathery snow. For some time we continued our muffled tramp, without my inquiring whither we were bent, or the object of our going. At length a loud, rough voice, shouting, "Stand. Who goes there?" brought

us to an abrupt halt, and immediately afterwards Harry Bluff sprang from the ivied trunk of an old hollow tree.

"What, Tom!" exclaimed he; "Is that you?"

"Yes," replied I.

"'Twas well that I took the precaution of challenging ye," he rejoined, "or I might have given ye an ugly tap in mistake. And so you 've thought twice o' the matter, eh?" continued he.

"I 've thought of nothing," returned I; "and am not here on my own account. This——" I turned to point at the Stranger, but he was gone. I glanced at the snow: there were my footmarks, but none other.

"What is the matter?" asked Harry. "You seem puzzled, Tom Bright."

"I am," muttered I, looking around me.

"Ay," rejoined he, "you drink too quick for a deep drinker. Hist!" continued he, sharply; and taking me by the arm, dragged me into his hiding-place.

"What do you hear?" I asked.

"He whom I 'm waiting for, I hope," returned Harry.

A scarcely audible tread might now be heard, and once or twice the clink of iron, like a horse-shoe striking against some flint or pebble. As the sound approached, a voice broke forth in a loud and hearty strain:

"With his ice, and snow, and rime,
Let Winter stèrnly come!
There 's not a sunnier clime
Than my fireside at home."

"Farmer Cutworth has taken his stirrup cup, I hear," remarked Harry. "When he comes opposite to us," continued he, "rush at his horse's head, and secure the bridle. I 'll do the rest."

"Don't reckon on my help——"

"Hush!" interrupted he; and the next moment he leaped forwards, and fixed his hold upon the rein of a horseman then passing. High into the air the animal reared with the violent check upon his bit; and staggering upon his haunches, down he rolled heavily to the ground.

"Your money!" cried Harry, throwing

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himself upon the prostrate form of the rider, " or your life."

" Both or neither," responded a firm gruff voice.

Freed of his burthen, the horse scrambled snorting to his feet, and galloped onwards, fleetest than the wind.

" I 've no time for parleying," said Harry, between his teeth, as if exercising his prodigious strength to its full power. " Give me your money, or I'll take it from your corpse."

There was no reply to this ; but a fearful struggle had commenced.

" Where are ye, Tom ?" hallooed Harry. " Come and settle him, or hold him while I do."

As if rooted to where I stood, however, there I remained, with no more power to move than all have felt in nightmares and uneasy dreams.

Writhing in each other's grasp, I heard, and, indeed, could see them fixed together, and dealing heavy blows in quick succession. Long gasps for breath, and sobs of effort, burst from their breasts like men engaged

only in the strife for life and death. Weak and weaker yet the contest grew, and still it was prolonged. For many a square yard around, the earth became slippery and blackened ; the snow melting in warm and newly-shed gore, and mingling in one thick and crimson pool. Now the moon flashed brightly out, but her pale ray turned red as it reached the ground ; and, as if shrinking from the touch, all again was darkness.

“ Help ! ” cried Harry. “ Where are ye, Tom ? ” But I neither stirred nor answered. I felt like one stunned, and yet capable of both seeing and hearing.

At this instant the moon again shone out, and the same dark shadow which I had seen in the churchyard flitted before me, and stood with outstretched hand pointing to where the horrid struggle continued.

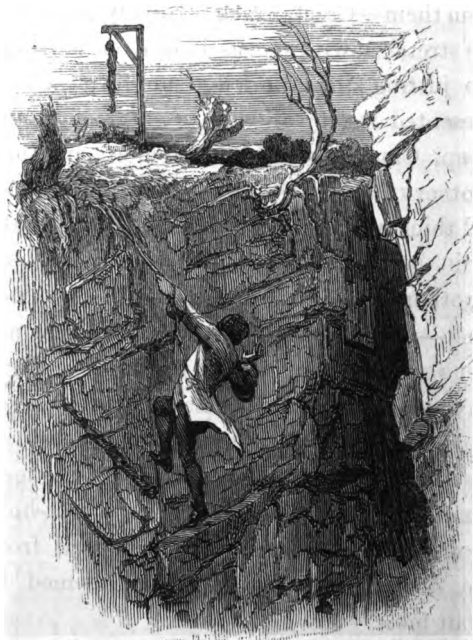
Now a wild and echoing shriek pierced the air. Loud and louder yet the hideous cry resounded.

“ Help, Tom—help ! ” but my limbs were spell-bound, and I could not stir. There however, the shade remained with uplifted

finger, as if urging me to render that assistance which I felt no power to give.

At length, with the force which the desperate only can use, and frenzied with what I saw and heard, I sprang forwards in spite of the power which held me, and clutched—a handful of withered grass.

Like one roused from the dead, I awoke with doubting senses, racked to the extreme of perplexity. Was it a dream? Thank God! the events of *this* night, at least, were dreamt. Yes, no blood had been shed; no life taken. Joy gushed to my heart at the thought; and I was about raising myself from the ground, when the weeds in my hand broke from their hold, and finding myself slipping, I caught a bramble and turned to see where I was. For one brief moment I balanced on the verge. It was too late. The briar stretched in my grasp, and over the side of the Devil's Shaft I rolled, with nothing between me and death but the weak and yielding bush. The roots, I could feel, were snapping one by one, and the earth and pebbles crumbled along the edge as I strove to gain it, and



dropped, splashing in the deep pool beneath. Oh the agony of that moment! I dug my fingers into a cleft; but it caved and broke from them—Crack, crack! Slowly the bramble stretched with me, as I sunk on its strain. No jutting stone, no ledge, not even a rent presented itself; all was even, smooth, and steep. Crack, crack! An inch more, and then another crack, crack! The earth and pebbles fell thicker and faster! Crack, crack! My brain became dizzy, and my eyes sightless. Another instant, and I felt—I knew not what—but glancing beneath, I saw that my feet rested on a small slanting ledge. Thus stayed in my descent, I balanced myself, and, drawing a knife, cut a hole in the side of the chasm, into which I thrust my disengaged hand. This done, I made one for a foot-hold above the ledge, and so drew myself from the doomed destruction which seemed to await me.

And there I stood scatheless, although but a moment before in the very jaws of death! I knew not what to do or say, for thankfulness of heart. Throwing myself

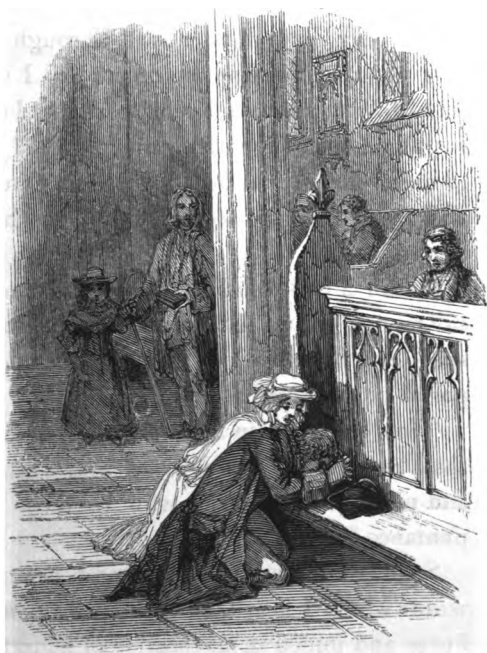
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on the greensward, I wept like a child, and felt that then to die would be at the true repentant moment of my life. The mercy extended melted that which punishment could only have hardened. Through the long night in my feverish dream had I been watched and guarded, and unworthy as I was, kept from every harm and injury. And now to be saved as I had been ! I tried to pray ; and if my tongue seemed mute, my heart was eloquent.

Hark ! a bell—and one, too, that had often summoned me of late unheeded. Away I sped, and never halted until I entered the portal of the church.

“Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety-and-nine just persons who need no repentance.”

Such were the consoling and beautiful words which I heard, as I dropped upon my knees and joined in the service of adoration. At its conclusion I still continued to ask forgiveness of the past, promising atonement for the future, and expressing a fervent hope



that I might be endued with strength to support my resolutions,

“Amen!” whispered a low response.

I looked to see from whom it came, and there was Mary kneeling by my side.

CHAPTER IX.

“ The rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance; they being penitent,
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
Not a frown further.”

TOM BRIGHT appeared to have arrived at a stage of his story bordering on a mysterious, perplexing, and unsatisfactory one to his truly patient listeners, and yet he gave no signs of being in haste to proceed to an end.

“ Well, Tom,” observed the Squire, “ I suppose there ’s a little more to add by way of a finish ? ”

“ I should certainly like to know,” remarked the yeoman who had sung the song, “ what that lodger at the Chequers was, and all about the shadows, and so forth.”

This request, spoken in a remarkably sententious tone, caused a burst of laughter from the Squire; and Tom Bright's face became quite purple—from what did not appear—perhaps a spasm. As for Mistress Bright, she became suddenly afflicted with a dry hacking cough, and had to bury her face in her handkerchief.

“ You see, Ned Terrywig,” rejoined Tom, after a strong check upon his risible muscles, “ there are as many bubbles on earth, we're informed, as there are in water; and the lodger at the Chequers might be one of them.”

Ned Terrywig seemed lost in the deepest cogitation for the shortest space of time imaginable; and then, as if a phosphoric light had shot through the mist and vapours of his brain, abruptly asked—

“ If he was a bagsman ? ”

“ My opinion is,” returned a sage-looking individual, whose wisdom hitherto had been pourtrayed in keeping a profoundly-still tongue, “ My opinion is,” repeated he, “ that it's all a flam.”

"Then take my word for it," added Tom Bright, in a manner carrying conviction with his assertion, "that your opinion is wrong, Peter Crummy. If you doubt what I say," he continued, "go to the Shaft, and you may there see to this day the marks of my knife within a few feet of its brink."

"It can't be all true, though," said the still unsatisfied Ned Terrywig.

"Well," replied Tom Bright, smiling, "I've told ye a Christmas tale. Believe me, however, that while I sought deep-drinking, and bad company, I heard a voice silent to others, and saw shadows which were sightless to all besides. Fear ever accompanies guilt, and to be happy is to be innocent."

"Good, Tom—good!" responded the Squire, approvingly.

"As soon," resumed Tom, who now appeared disposed to take up the thread of his narrative, "as the Squire heard what I had to say, relative to the miseries of mind and

body which I had endured, he pardoned me, saying, that if I was truly contrite, the object of his resolve to punish me, and all concerned in the late outrages—for they, alas! were, too true—was attained. It was a long time, however, before any of my companions took courage to return to their homes, and Harry Bluff never did. His end remains unknown; but a travelling pedlar circulated a report here that he heard him sentenced to banishment for life.”

Upon arriving at this link in the chain of events, the narrator turned to Ned Terrywig, and observed, “Your father had good reason to remember my wedding-day, Ned.”

“That he had,” replied the Squire, laughing heartily.

“Indeed!” rejoined the yeoman. “I never heard him mention any particular circumstance connected with it.”

“No,” returned Tom Bright, “I dare say not. The elder Terrywig was always very silent on that score.”

“Tell them all about it, Tom,” said Mistress Bright. “I ’m sure I could listen to

the charming delights of our wedding-day for ever."

"Perhaps, ma'am," replied the individual addressed as Peter Crummy, "it was the happiest of your life?"

"No, sir," rejoined Mistress Bright, with her face absolutely illuminated with smiles, "it was only the beginning of the happiest of my life."

This smart and complimentary retort occasioned much applause on the part of the company, and Tom Bright had some difficulty to restrain himself from kissing his good old wife then and there.

"'Happy is the bride that the sun shines upon,' said Tom; "and if there's truth in the proverb," continued he, "there could never be a happier one than my Mary. It was a bright and beautiful morning, and the first of May. Birds trilled their early songs on twig and branch, and shook glistening dew-drops from every bough and spray. Bees hummed and butterflies flitted to the



maiden blossoms of the spring. There was joy in nature, joy in my heart, and joy in everything.

As we went on our way to church, and a goodly number of friends and neighbours joined us, red-faced, chubby-cheeked children scattered flowers before us, singing quaint rhymes for our welfare and happiness. Upon our return, the Squire met us, and invited all to partake of the wedding cheer in this very hall. Little expecting such an honour, and yet nothing loth to accept it, we turned our steps hither, and found that board," continued Tom, pointing to the blackened oak table on which the Christmas fare had a few hours since been disposed of, "squeaking and grunting under a load of as substantial and dainty dishes as it has done to-day.

Many kind words had been spoken, wishes expressed, and a general toast proposed to our health and fortune; and I was about making the best acknowledgment in my power, when who should walk in but your father, Ned Terrywig! I shall give no offence, I'm sure, by saying that he was

remarkably grave, and, indeed, sleepy, in all that he said and did. It might be that his ideas corresponded with his body, which was particularly fat and heavy ; and that to give expression to them, comprised a matter of considerable effort and difficulty. Be this as it may, Mister Terrywig, as he entered the hall, walked straight up to where I was standing, and after looking at me in silence, shook his head, closed his eyes, and seemed to be refreshing himself with a short doze.

“Well, Mr. Terrywig!” said I. “You’re a late guest, but I can safely add, a welcome one.”

“Young man,” replied he, lifting his eyelids and again dropping them, “I fear not.”

“What’s that?” returned the Squire, sitting at the head of the table. “What’s that I hear?”

Ned was a little roused at this question ; and after giving himself a violent shake or two, observed, “that he was a special constable.”

“And what of that?” rejoined the Squire,

while the attention of all was riveted in astonishment at Ned Terrywig's remark.

"A man's dooty," returned the special constable—but here he was at fault, and it occupied a lapse of some moments before he could add, "is a man's dooty."

"No one can gainsay that," said the Squire; "neither is there any disposition to do so here."

"So far, so good," replied Ned. "I'm not a fast man," continued he, "by no means: but what I'm coming to is this. I received your warrant, sir, signed as a justice of the peace, in his most gracious Majesty's name, to serve, take, and execute upon the body of one Thomas Bright, whensoever and wheresoever I might find him. Now, here he is," said the special constable, tapping me on the shoulder, and looking like a man who had earned a reward, and expected payment at sight.

"Are you serious?" asked the Squire, quitting his seat and approaching Ned Terrywig. "Are you serious," repeated he, "in serving that now?"

"As serious, sir,"—Ned was at a loss; but after forty winks, concluded by saying, "as a bed-post."

"Then why delay it till now?" said the squire. "There have been plenty of opportunities before."

"The fact is, sir," replied Ned Terrywig, unfolding the document originally intended to commit me to prison, "that too much care often causes a total loss. Now," resumed the special constable, "in order that the writ of caption might be always at hand when wanted, I put it away so carefully that I couldn't find it myself. For weeks I've been searching to no purpose, until this morning, as I scratched my head—a way that I've got when a-thinking—something ran into my finger, and upon taking off my wig to see what was the matter, there I found the warrant pinned to the top of it. So you see, sir," said Ned, "the cause of delay; but better late than never," continued he, taking from his pocket a pair of handcuffs.

This proceeding caused no little alarm; but it was quickly dissipated by the Squire,

who, snatching the strip of parchment from the special constable's hand, declared "that he should eat it!"

The scene which followed beggars description. Amid shouts of laughter, Ned Terrywig was thrust into a chair, and the Squire, after placing the warrant between two thick slices of brown bread, ordered him, in a peremptory tone, to begin the work with his teeth.

Without making the smallest objection, and in a methodical manner, Ned commenced the sandwich; but after tugging away at the tough morsel, observed "that he didn't think he could get through unless it was buttered."

"No, no, no!" replied the squire. "Every morsel shall be eaten as dry as sawdust!"

Poor Ned! he did his best towards the completion of his task. Right manfully he pulled at the parchment and bread; and although his jaws ached with the labour, still he kept them wagging without let, check, or stop.

"Might I have a sup of beer, sir?"

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at length asked Ned, in an appealing manner.

“No !” replied the Squire.

“Or a drop of water ?” returned the special constable, by way of a forlorn hope.

“Not even a drop of water,” added the Squire. “Such a wedding guest as you,” continued he, “are not worthy of one.”

Ned Terrywig’s countenance now wore such a pitiable expression, as he mumbled at his unpalatable task, that Mary attempted to intercede for a release ; but the Squire would not listen to any relinquishment of it.

“The last atom shall be swallowed,” said he, sternly, “if it has to be crammed down his throat !”

The special constable groaned in anguish upon hearing this mandate ; but sticking steadily to his work, the sandwich, at length, disappeared, and with it the penalty of Ned Terrywig’s folly.

“Such,” said Tom Bright, “were the principal features and incidents of our wedding-day.”

CHAPTER X.

“The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve.”

THERE was a clock in a corner of the hall, and as grim an old tell-tale of the fleeing hours as ever marked them in Time's index. Its thin tick-tack sounded like the piping voice of age; and above the faded dial, on which the numbers were now but faintly legible, a roughly hewed figure, holding a scythe, swayed with the pendulum in measured limits. Night and day, year after year, for an age and more, had the old clock kept the same unvaried account. Its long black rusty hands were now approaching the hour of midnight, and the Squire, perceiving this, exclaimed—

“Now for the gathering of Omens. 'Tis within a few minutes of twelve.”

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This remark occasioned a great sensation in the circle, but more particularly among the female portion of it.

Old and young rose from their seats with alacrity, and several hastened to bring in a massive log decorated with holly and ivy, placed on the threshold of the door leading into the hall, so that every one had to step across it as they entered. Lifting it from the ground, all broke forth in the following strain :

“Come, bring with a noise
My merrie, merrie boys,
The Christmas log to the firing;
While the good Squire, he
Bids you all be free,
And drink to your heart’s desiring.”

“With the last yeere’s brand
Light the new block, and
For good successe in his spending,
On your psaltries play,
That sweet luck may
Come while the log is a teending.”

During the singing of this distich, the Squire took a charred brand, and firing it, set light to the holly and ivy with which the

yule log was garnished, and then it was cast upon the hearth. For a moment the heavy mass smothered the flaming ashen faggots and pile of wood ; and where there had been bright, twining, and licking flames, nothing but thick smoke rolled in dense clouds upwards. More than one heart began to fear for the evil omen of extinguishing the Christmas fire ; and all eyes were bent anxiously on the smouldering heap, when the hammer of the clock struck, and as it fell, a blaze burst forth like ignited gunpowder.

Loud and long was the cheer following this token of good and happy fortune, and the lasses drew from their bosoms small bunches of rosemary, laurel, miseltoe, and rue ; and throwing them into the fiercely bright fire, breathed silently many a wish and dearly treasured hope. If, however, no words expressed what they were, there was a language in exchanged and stolen looks which revealed them quite as well, and perhaps with equal satisfaction. At the conclusion of this mystic ceremony, Tom Bright

went beneath the miseltoe, and holding a light above his head appeared to be examining it with the nicest scrutiny.

"What are you doing, Tom?" asked the Squire.

"I'm looking for a berry, Sir," replied Tom.

"By my troth," rejoined the Squire, "it was speckled thickly enough this morning."

"Yes," returned Tom Bright, "but there's been so much kissing since then, that I fear not one remains."

Diligently he pursued his task; and, being assisted by several curious to learn the object of his gallantry, a berry was at length discovered, and a full and fine one it proved, between a couple of closely-grown leaves.

"It seems to be left o' purpose," said Tom, plucking it from the bough; and presenting it to his wife, he led her beneath the now stripped miseltoe, and gave her as hearty and loving a kiss as the first he pressed upon her lips.

"There, Mary," said he, amid the general plaudits of the company, who were quite

vociferous at this sprightly deed. "Many a long Christmas since I first kissed ye here," he continued; "and though old we be, we'll still hope and trust that the Christmas is yet far off when I cannot give ye a berry-kiss."

"Ay," returned the Squire, "all will hope that, Tom, as with every couple present—married or plighted. But come," said he cheerfully, "we must have no sad thoughts to-night. On with your yule games! Remember, 'tis Christmas night, boys."

"Harry-racket!" was now the cry. "A game of Harry-racket!"

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed a bright eyed damsel in tight-laced boddice and showy kirtle. "Not one shall ever find me."

"Off, then," cried the Squire, "and let's have proof of your craft and cunning."

In less than a minute a shrill voice called "Hoop!" and away all started to seek the hider.

In nooks and corners, and behind half-closed doors, and under lumbering chairs and tables, the throng scoured in search of the

maiden; but some time elapsed, and their endeavours proved fruitless. There was one more especially active than the rest; and he flew here and there, and dived among dark and unknown localities in the most unaccountable manner, and greatly to the risk of breaking his shins, and general contusions to his body. Heedless, however, of all injuries, he continued the hunt in the fiercest manner imaginable; and if the cause had been as well known to others as himself, there might not have been so much surprise and wonderment occasioned by it. The matter was a secret; but perhaps a reward had been promised in the event of his being the first to discover the hiding retreat.

Be this as it may, the ardent seeker proved by his efforts fully entitled to some recompense, and from a concealed scream mingled with a sort of half-muffled and strangely smothered laugh, which seemed to come from the very darkest corner of an exceedingly gloomy cupboard, he doubtlessly received it on the spot. At any rate, upon the twain re-appearing, the discovered

lass exhibited a slight disarrangement of a few luxuriant curls; and why they should have strayed from their bounds and borders at this moment, could only be accounted for from the trifling degree of violence which probably took place in the gloomy cupboard.

The Squire, be it understood, was one of the busiest in the endeavours used to find the hider. What *he* could be so energetic about, did not appear at the time; but upon another young and pretty girl being chosen to take her turn in Harry-racket, the cat, vulgarly so to speak, jumped out of the bag! Never was any old gentleman's energies exercised to such an extent. If he had been busy before, he now proved himself to be quite the most active of the throng; and ran about so nimbly, that his legs, incased in rib-silk stockings, seemed to twinkle again, and the broad skirts of his coat stood stiffly out, like a twopenny postman's on Saint Valentine's morning. Illiberal indeed would the Fates have been, had they denied him success; and it cannot but prove truly refreshing to learn, that after peering and peeping into all the

most improbable and impossible places wherein the object of his quest could be ensconced, that he at length dropped upon the right, and pounced upon the captured damsel as a schoolboy might in a scramble for a pippin.

“Ha, ha !” laughed the Squire, a little the worse for loss of breath. “I thought I should, and so I have,” continued he, conducting his prize, with something like pomp, towards the miseltoe.

“Your pardon, sir,” said Mistress Bright, while her eyes sparkled with very effervescence of mischief; “but there’s not a berry left.”

“There was one found for you, ma’am,” replied the Squire, good-humouredly, “and perchance the same favour may still be for me.”

Again was a search commenced for the indispensable preliminary to a salute beneath the bough; and, as it was being turned slowly round, with a phalanx of eyes bent upon every twig and leaf, something fell from the centre and chinked upon the floor.

“ A fairy’s gift ! ” cried Mistress Bright, stooping, and picking it from the ground. “ Look ye, a ring—a bright gold ring ! ”

“ And a good substitute for a berry,” returned the Squire ; and taking the hoop of gold from Mistress Bright, he placed it on the hand of the maiden, and then——

Well, no matter ! There is many a one with lazier blood who would gladly kiss such a pair of red and pouting lips, and shrewdly guess them to be designed for the especial purpose—as no doubt they were. Whether there was any collusion between the Squire and Mistress Bright respecting the ring, is a circumstance which, if a secret, remained a close compact between them, and never was divulged.

Ned Terrywig, since the anecdote of his paternal parent being compelled to swallow the warrant, appeared to lose all relish for the sports and pastimes, and sat apart by himself in a dull, desponding, and solitary state. Sighs, too, escaped his lips, and he looked as if suffering from unhappy reflection, or like one labouring under the

effects of maudlin inebriety ; but more especially the latter.

“ Is anything wrong with ye, Ned ? ” whispered Tom Bright, with friendly solicitude.

“ No, Tom — no,” replied he ; while a desponding shake of the head, and two large unshed tears swimming in his eyes, went great lengths to deny the assertion.

“ Nay, nay,” rejoined Tom, “ your looks gainsay that. Tell me what it is ? ”

“ I ’d rather not,” returned Ned, becoming momentarily more overcome.

“ Tut, tut ! ” added Tom Bright. “ I may be able to get ye relief.”

“ It ’s here, then ! ” said Ned Terrywig, slapping—the design was his bosom ; but his broad palm fell several inches below that defined portion of the body. “ It ’s here, then ! ” repeated he.

“ Cramp ? ” briefly inquired Tom.

“ No, no, no ! ” replied Ned, almost frantic at the mistake.

“ It ’s my feelin’s, my wounded feelin’s ! ”

“ How have they been hurt ? ” asked Tom, soothingly.

By a powerful effort, Ned Terrywig composed himself, and speaking softly, said—

“ You know what my father died of? ”

Tom Bright conveyed a negative by shaking his head.

“ It was a fit of the whistles,” continued Ned, deeply affected.

“ Indeed ! ” returned Tom Bright, not having any better reply at hand.

“ Yes,” resumed Ned, in a tone and manner carrying with them a most impressive effect ; “ and I was a-thinking whether that sandwich you spoke of mightn’t have stuck somewhere to cause ’em.”

“ Don’t think that,” rejoined Tom, giving Ned Terrywig a pat of encouragement between the shoulders. “ Why, he lived more than twenty years after ! ”

“ True,” added Ned Terrywig, somewhat consoled ; “ and, upon second thoughts, I don’t suppose anything—not even leather—would remain in the gizzard a score years and up’ards.”

With this, Ned regained much of his former cheerfulness, and was quite ready to

N

join in the Gaping Match now in active preparation.

There might be little wit in this old game ; but whatever it lacked in this attribute, was made amends for in the roars of laughter following the successive attempts to set the whole company yawning. Every one tried in turn ; and although partial success attended the exertions of each, yet complete and decided victory was not attained until it fell to the essay of Peter Crummy. That individual no sooner opened his "wide and ponderous jaws," than the endeavours on the part of the spectators to keep their mouths closed proved completely futile. It was in vain they pressed their lips together, and twisted and screwed their faces into all manner of distortions. The impulse, with one and all, to stretch their jaws to the fullest extent, was irresistible ; and Peter Crummy, proud of his achievement, was proclaimed the "King of Yawners !"

"By your leave, there," hallooed a lusty voice. "By your leave," and through the crowd, who quickly gave way, a wide bowl

was borne, with its ingredients hissing and blazing in the most furious style.

Upon its being placed upon the table, the candles were extinguished, and Mistress Bright received the Squire's command to proclaim the usual caution.

Taking a ladle, and stirring the burning contents, Mistress Bright delivered in a rhythmical metre, the following words—

“Snap-dragon, snap, all snap when ye can:
In the fierce flame our faces look wan;
Quick be your dip, and dip in your turn,
Lest that your fingers meet with a burn.”

At the end of the verse, and with little regard to the warning it contained, a number of fingers were thrust into the flaming liquor, and, amid a din of exclamations, among which the “Oh’s!” predominated, the hot plums were extracted, and conveyed to many a mouth, heedless of blisters. Peter Crummy’s seemed, indeed, to be quite fire-proof; for he dipped his hand into the bowl, and, conveying it to his lips in a very deliberate manner, con-

tinued to munch away without so much as giving a single puff.

It was not so, however, with all; for some stood by and endeavoured to take advantage of their neighbour's hardihood by snatching the plums away after they had been secured. These attempts at rapine caused many a boisterous wrestle, ending in a heap of fallen bodies being piled upon the floor.

The Yule Games followed each other in rapid succession; and as soon as one ended, another commenced.

"Where is the Horse Collar?" asked the Squire.

"Here, Sir," replied Tom Bright: at the same moment pushing his face through the collar, he did his best to render his features as unprepossessing as possible.

It must be 'confessed, however, that this essay on Tom's part to grin most horribly revolved itself into an eminent failure; and the squint of Ned Terrywig was fully accorded to be pre-eminently preferable. Various were the opinions concerning the

merits of the several candidates; and the knotty point for decision, as to who had entitled himself to the claim of being deemed the ugliest in that company, seemed likely to become a difficult one for solution, until it fell to Peter Crummy's turn. Then, indeed, all doubt vanished. Nothing could possibly equal, much less excel, the hideous grimace that Peter twisted his naturally ill-favoured countenance into; and without further opposition, which of necessity must have proved impotent, it was adjudged that he had fairly won the distinction.

"I've lost that," remarked Ned Terrywig, apparently a little mortified; "but I'll win the Whistling Match." And he proved as good as his word; for notwithstanding strong efforts were used to make him laugh during the performance, Ned whistled 'Sweet Lass of Richmond Hill,' without relaxing a muscle or missing a semibreve. In vain were allusions made respecting his form and features; and as futile the distorted and grinning faces which met his view on every side. Ned continued to the last note,

and boldly challenged any one to the same difficult ordeal.

Numerous were the acceptances ; but so far from any one of them approaching the skill displayed by Ned Terrywig, each assisted in setting its superiority off to the greatest possible advantage. Not one could whistle three consecutive bars without spluttering forth into a loud hoarse laugh.

Then followed Hoodman Blind, and it was a most astonishing circumstance that he who was blindfolded should be ever in pursuit of one particular buxom, comely, plump, and cherry-cheek lass. Let her fly to what corner of the hall she would, squeeze behind the fattest backs, clamber upon chairs and tables, thread through the thickest group, still he was not to be shaken off. And what was also very remarkable, that although he absolutely blundered against many others purposely intending to be caught, he absolutely avoided them, and took no advantage whatever of the opportunity presented. At length, where escape looked difficult, he hemmed her in ; and just as she was ducking

under his arms, he caught her round the waist and held her there, it appeared, much longer than was necessary for the mere object of capture. However, perhaps it was a privilege in Hoodman Blind, and if so he only exercised his right to the fullest extent.

Long had the game continued, and the shouts and bursts of laughter swelled and died among the beams and rafters in a series of ringing, echoing peals. Hearts and eyes were light and bright, and not so much as one heartache could have been leased from the collective care under the roof of that old hall. But with merry or sad, Time keeps the same reckoning. He may occasionally seem to lag and loiter, and sometimes hasten more swiftly than his wont; but with one stealthy pace only he treads along rendering the present what was the future, and the past forgotten.

Louder, harsher, more grating to the ear, with spleen and spite in the very sound did the old clock strike the first hour in another day. As if moved by one impulse, the mirth ceased, and all eyes were turned to the dial.

There it frowned, and reproachfully pointed to the waning time, as if forbidding another moment to be lost.

“Well!” said the Squire bringing the palms of his hands together with a loud satisfactory crack, “I think we must now mix our Loving Cup.”

This was the well-known intimation for the games to be put an end to, and the signal for separation.

As with the Wassail Bowl, the Squire proceeded to mingle the ingredients; and in a few minutes a deep and heavy tankard with double handles was filled to the brim with hot spiced ale and other palatable additions. The reeking beverage sent forth a most fragrant odour, and countless sniffs were given expressive of the gratification from its virtues.

Hand in hand the company formed a circle in the middle of the hall; and the Squire, standing in the centre of it, said in a loud and cordial tone—

“May each heart be united, as each hand is clasped, in good-will, kindness, and

fellowship! May all live long, and all live well! And now that we part, we 'll hope to meet again, as good old friends!"

Upon the conclusion of this hearty sentiment, the Squire raised the Loving Cup to his lips; and then from one to another it was passed, for each to quaff to its fulfilment with all sincerity.

Shortly afterwards the hall was deserted. The dying embers smouldered on the hearth, and the old clock tick-tacked in dark and silent gloom.

So, gentle reader, was Christmas spent in the Olden Time.

THE END.

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